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by
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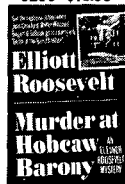
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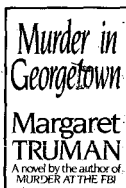


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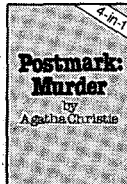
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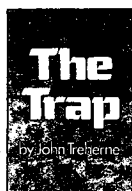
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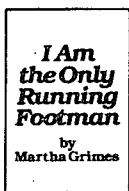
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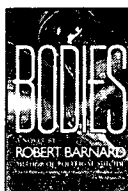
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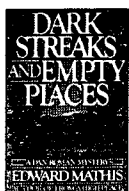
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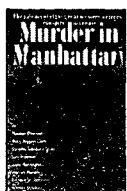
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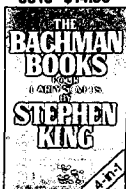
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Yet again this year congratulations are in order for one of our authors. Loren D. Estleman's story, "Eight Mile and Dequindre," published in AHMM in May 1985, has won the Shamus Award for Best Private Eye Short Story of 1985, and of course we're delighted.

Very pleased as well that a second AHMM story, Rob Kantner's "Perfect Pitch" (July 1985); was also nominated for the award.

The Shamus Awards are presented annually by the Private Eye Writers of America, and are announced in October at Bouchercon. The list of nominees and winners in all categories follows, with the winners in bold face type.

BEST P.I. SHORT STORY OF 1985:

- "Eight Mile and Dequindre"** by Loren D. Estleman (AHMM)
"Lucky Penny" by Linda Barnes (*New Black Mask*)
"Shooting Match" by Wayne Dundee (*Hardboiled*)
"Perfect Pitch" by Rob Kantner (AHMM)
"The Snaphaunce" by Robert J. Randisi (*Hardboiled*)

BEST HARDCOVER P.I. NOVEL OF 1985:

- "B" Is for Burglar** by Sue Grafton (Henry Holt)
The Naked Liar by Harold Adams (Mysterious Press)
Hardball by Doug Hornig (Scribners)
A Catskill Eagle by Robert B. Parker (Delacorte)
Bones by Bill Pronzini (St. Martin's)

BEST PAPERBACK P.I. NOVEL OF 1985:

- Poverty Bay** by Earl Emerson (Avon)
The Rainy City by Earl Emerson (Avon)
The Kill by Douglas Heyes (Ballantine)
TRACE: Pigs Get Fat by Warren Murphy (NAL)
Blue Heron by Philip Ross (Tor)

BEST FIRST P.I. NOVEL OF 1985:

- Hardcover** by Wayne Warga (Scribners)
New, Improved Murder by Ed Gorman (St. Martin's)
Sleeping Dog by Dick Lochte (Arbor House)
Flood by Andrew Vachss (Donald I. Fine, Inc.)
Embrace the Wolf by Ben Schutz (Bluejay)

At Bouchercon also this time around the "Anthonys" (for Anthony Boucher) were initiated, the intention being to inaugurate a fan award (like science fiction's Hugos), with the nominees and winners to be selected by vote among those attending

the convention. We haven't space here to list them all, but since our special interest is the short story, we did want to mention that the Anthony for Best Short Story went to Linda Barnes for "Lucky Penny."

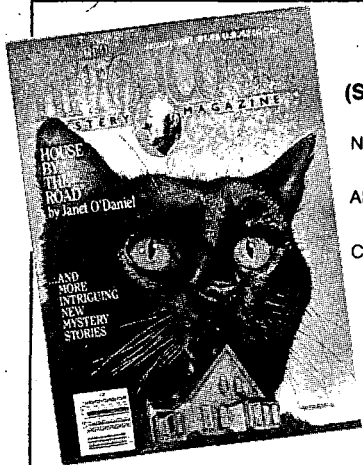
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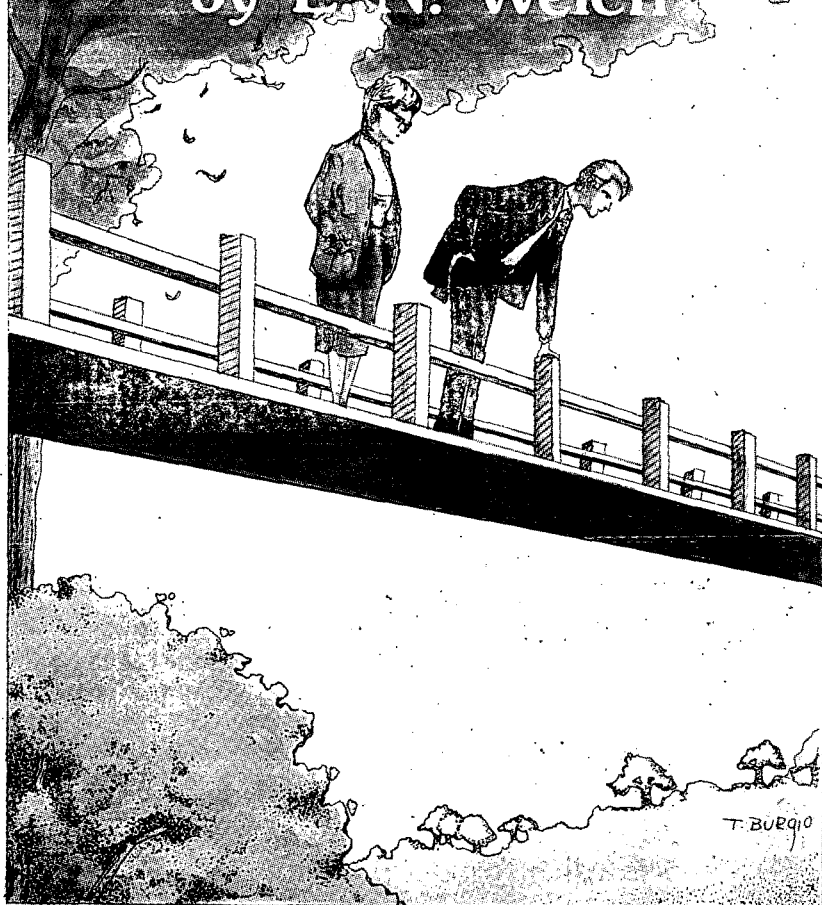
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FICTION

Just an Unofficial Investigation

by E. N. Welch



The body might not have been found for hours if Hattie Scheffel's scruffy orange tom had come in for breakfast, but he hadn't, even though she had hoped his prowling urges were only dim memories by now, and thus she had ventured the faint, steep trail behind her house into the ravine. She picked her way across the treacherous rock bed, late fall drifts of red and brown and yellow leaves concealing slippery pockets of decaying vegetation. It made good mulch for her chrysanthemums, but Mort had always scolded that she'd break her neck down here, ought to stick to sidewalks at her age, but Mort had been gone for three years and she couldn't bear it if anything had happened to old Rufus, too. As she passed under the narrow wooden footbridge spanning the ravine, she saw the red stripe on the sleeve of the tan jogging suit, then another down the side, and forgot caution.

He lay on his stomach, legs and arms casually outstretched, at least as far as fat, stubby limbs that filled the sleeves and pants could extend. She brushed aside the twigs and leaves that had settled on him, threw a larger broken branch out of the way, and pulled at his fleshy left shoulder until she had rolled the top

half of him over. His head flopped back, and she recoiled at the open, sightless eyes and slack mouth. The faint yapping of a dog came to her then, and up ahead, through the trees that climbed the left bank, she caught a glimpse of a chain link fence at the brow of the slope. Evelyn. Evelyn would be up, getting ready for school. Evelyn would know what to do— besides, he was *her* superintendent.

“**M**iss Ellerby? May I come in?”
Evelyn Ellerby looked over

her shoulder at the stocky figure standing inside the door. “Of course. I’m just trying to roll this map up. Like window shades—always unsprung or broken.”

“Let me.” He moved to her side, and realized that he had to stretch, while she easily reached the bracket high overhead. He grinned up at her as he wound the spring. “Raymond Garza.” He tested the tension, and the map rattled back into place.

“Yes, I saw you with Avery Henning before the last class. You’re the—what *do* I call you?”

“Ray.” He liked her directness. “No titles necessary—this is just an informal—”

“Investigation?” For a mo-

ment he was a student again, defensive against the teacher's authority. He tensed under her scrutiny, certain that her appraisal took in every detail, from broad, round face to barrel chest to shiny black shoes and by the time she got back to the little dark eyes in the squint wrinkles, she had him nailed, probably knew whether he wore briefs or jockey shorts, which side of the bed he slept on. He'd hate to be a kid in her class with something to hide.

"Well, sort of. Not really." He didn't know how to explain it—that Chet Williford, who some said wielded the real clout in the capital, knew all the right buttons to push, was a cousin of the late Superintendent James Tilbury, hadn't been satisfied that Cousin James had lost his footing while jogging early one crisp morning and plummeted to his untimely demise. The buttons he pushed were connected to circuits that wound through the state education office into the attorney general's bailiwick. "Just look around, talk to some people, make him happy," Ray had been instructed.

The town was a quiet, pretty little place, off the tourist itinerary, where the biggest event of the year was the two-day Pecan Festival. Ray couldn't remember ever having heard of

a newsworthy item from here, hadn't even known the school superintendent had died until he was told.

"But Mr. Tilbury was an important man—"

She raised an eyebrow.

"—and being superintendent, he had connections at the state level, and his friends—"

Both eyebrows lifted.

"—just want to make sure the findings are correct as reported." He let his breath out. "And since Mrs. Scheffel came to you after finding him, and you were the second one to see him, Mr. Henning suggested that I talk to you."

"There's not much to tell—the police took my statement, and Clay—Chief Dyer—should have it and Judge Blankenship's ruling."

"He does, ma'am, and I've seen all that and talked with Mrs. Scheffel, and yesterday I spoke with Mrs. Tilbury at her daughter's. But since you teach here as well as live in the neighborhood, I thought you could—"

She cut him off with a laugh. "Ray, everyone in this town lives 'in the neighborhood.' There are only about six thousand people, not counting those out in the county, and you can walk to everything there is here. And speaking of that, if you like, you may walk along

with me to my house—I have an aerobics class at four, and Henry the Eighth will be expecting his dinner.”

“Henry the Eighth?”

She took her jacket from the closet near the door and shrugged into it. Ray mentally kicked himself for not being quick enough to help, but if she noticed his lapse, nothing in her manner indicated it. Then he remembered—Miss Ellerby, longest tenure on the faculty, chairman of the History Department, high school fixture, town landmark, single and independent.

“Ah, yes, Henry. Victim of bad press, I’m afraid, just like my Henry. He was a stray when I took him, and the alleged sire of every litter of pups born that year. I let him enjoy the reputation—didn’t tell anyone the vet discovered he’d already had his credentials removed. But I keep him fenced, and he’s good company. Good watchdog, too—barks at everything, even things that aren’t there.”

He watched her, keeping a bit back, as she locked the classroom door and strode down the hall. She cut a regal figure: stylishly short silver hair; straight, trim back in a well-cut suit softened by the ruffles at blouse collar and cuffs. Her legs embarrassed him; she had to be at least twenty years older than

he, and here he was ogling an old lady’s legs like some kind of pervert. Altogether a formidable woman. He was chagrined to see that her pumps were nearly flat-heeled, and hurried to catch up with her.

Outside the sun was bright, but the air was decidedly chill, with the cutting edge that characterized fall in this part of the state. Ray was glad he had zipped the lining into his coat.

The wide street leading from the high school was lined on both sides with houses whose architectural styles capsulized the previous hundred years, from porticoed Greek Revival and turreted Victorian Gothic to 1930’s front-porch bungalow and ranch-style modern.

“Over there,” Evelyn Ellerby gestured toward the right, “beyond the houses you can see the trees along the edge of the ravine. My yard backs up to it—a block over, four blocks down. The Tilburys lived two blocks in the other direction where the new houses are being built. She left last Saturday, right after the funeral, and I think it’s already for sale. That’s *her* daughter, you know, not his. She kept to herself, didn’t socialize much. Mousy sort.”

Ray couldn’t decide if she was factual or critical. “Right,” he said, and followed her around

"He jogged nearly every morning, same route most days—although you couldn't tell by looking at him." Now he knew; it was criticism. "Up Elm to Pine, then across the foot-bridge to the other side of town; down Main to Highway 14 and back around to Elm—about four miles, I'd say. Go left."

"Miss Ellerby, Mr. Henning suggested that—well, that you would—could—help me with the school people. Oh, he was very polite, answered all my questions, but frankly, he seemed—reluctant."

"Of course, Mr. Garza—Ray. School people don't talk. Didn't you know that?" Her eyes were smiling behind the lenses in the soft pink frames. "We've been taught to present a united front, to be wary of outsiders, and to speak only through official channels. And this is upsetting: Mr. Tilbury had been here only since Mort Scheffel died—not even three years, and there have been a number of—changes—we've had to adjust to. Now Mr. Tilbury has had an unfortunate accident—fell from the bridge and broke his neck, but here you are, a week later, digging around—for what?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe nothing. First, I'm going to go over the police report and the judge's, and then I want to ask

around, find out if anyone was out last Wednesday morning early."

She laughed at that. "How long do you plan to stay? This is an early-rising town."

"Well, at least find out if anyone wanted Mr. Tilbury—gone."

"Look down there." She halted at the curb and pointed right. Less than a street, more than an alley, the pavement ended behind the houses on either side at a well-worn dirt path that sloped through the trees toward a narrow bridge with low railings. On the other side, the trees and undergrowth were denser, obscuring the town on that side. "This was never meant to be a road through here, just a convenience for people. I recall when my father and Hattie Scheffel's brother and some of the other neighbors built the first walkway there, so the kids wouldn't have to walk so far to school. The Scheffel place is on the other side of the trees, fifth house on the right, and Main Street is straight ahead, about three blocks."

She pushed her cuff back to check the time. "I really have to hurry now for my class. Tell you what—if you're still in town tomorrow evening, why don't you come by about five for a drink and we'll talk then."

A drink? Miss Ellerby, the school teacher? Something of

his astonishment must have shown in his face.

"Or tea," she amended, and smiled at his discomfiture.

"Either one, ma'am. And thank you, I'd like that."

He watched the graceful figure in the smart suit cross to the opposite curb. "Oh, Miss Ellerby. May I ask a very personal question?"

She turned toward him, waiting.

"Just how old—" He winced; there was no tactful way to put it.

She studied him for a moment. "Sixty-three." Then she smiled warmly and walked away.

Damn! Legs like that at sixty-three, and he bet all the rest was original equipment, too. He wondered if Sylvie's legs would hold up that well, and across his mind flashed the image of his mother-in-law; he shook his head sadly.

Thursday had been a day of surprises, puzzling and unexpected, for Ray Garza, and the bits and pieces he had gathered, together with names and faces, floated through his mind, colliding, drifting, rearranging, rejecting. He found himself looking forward to five o'clock, counting on Evelyn Ellerby to be his sounding board, instinctively

depending on her logic.

The house somehow fit her. It was a modest late Victorian, superbly proportioned, delighting the eye with gingerbread whimsy and welcoming with wide porches and wicker and yellow flowers. He heard the dog bark from the back as he climbed the steps. The door opened, and there stood Miss Ellerby, looking as Miss Ellerby should, unschoolmarmish and casually chic in a silky shirt, faded jeans, and running shoes.

He was as unprepared for the interior as he had been for everything else that day. No cosy clutter here, but bare, bleached floors, muted pastels on low-slung couches and chairs, glass and chrome, warmed with greenery and good prints and charm. He had seen less taste in glossy magazines on coffee tables. She smiled at his astonishment.

"People who don't know better are surprised to find that teachers don't always live according to *their* expectations. That's one-dimensional thinking. And you look as if you've done a lot of thinking today. What can I get you?"

He debated. "Tea, if you have it," he said finally. Stereotypes die hard.

The chair was as comfortable as it looked, his hostess solic-

itous, the tea hot and fragrant. With another little jolt, Ray realized it had been the right choice.

"It's been a confusing day, Miss Ellerby. I'm not sure *what* I've found."

"Oh? How so?"

"In a town this size, I thought the death of the school superintendent would be a cause for concern; instead, it doesn't seem to matter—at least not in the usual way." He consulted a small notepad. "Jack Wilson at the real estate agency, for example, was more excited that he's already found a buyer for the house. At the school business office, everything of his—personal effects, pictures, certificates, papers—were packed away in grocery cartons before the funeral. His wife never picked them up, so I've taken them with me. His staff seemed anxious to be rid of the stuff. Mr.—here it is—Mr. Lawrence Gough, his neighbor, said that he hoped Mrs. Tilbury would be happier now, and three members of the board told me they were too busy to see me today, if I made an appointment they would try to work me in soon. What's going on here?"

She took a sip of tea first. "People at the top often have to make—unpopular decisions."

"Surely they can't all be unpopular. Did you like him?"

She stirred her tea absently, as if considering. "No, I didn't like him." Then she looked up, seemed to have reached a decision. "No, he wasn't the sort of person one likes, but I don't think that mattered to him. He was a small man, you know. Power was more important to him."

"If he was so disliked, why was he hired? Why did they keep him on?"

"Ray, Mort Scheffel had been in the district thirty-eight years when he died, twenty-six of those as superintendent. We had a sound academic program, a good band, fine athletic teams—but nothing flashy. We just turned out nice, achieving youngsters who could hold their own anywhere. When Mort died, there was some in town who wanted to change that. Although we had well-qualified applicants from the district, like Avery Henning and Travis Mills, the business manager, the loudest prevailed, and James Tilbury was hired. He'd been around, 'left his mark,' they said, on other schools." Her mouth twisted wryly. "It didn't take long to find out what the mark was."

"What did he do?"

"Just—things. I don't think I should discuss it with you; some of it was rumor, unprovable, but it was school business and—"

"I know—teachers don't talk. But you could save me some time, and you've been more—helpful—than anyone else, Miss Ellerby."

"Because I'm immune. Oh, I know that sounds conceited, but it's so. I'm 'old family,' kin to half the town, been here almost forever—and besides, I'm retiring this year. But only a few people know it—some special friends—so please don't mention it. More tea?"

As he passed his cup into her extended left hand, he saw below the edge of her sleeve the yellow-green remains of fading bruises circling her forearm. "Nasty business."

She tugged the sleeve down. "Reaching under the fence to pull the grass. I do like a neat yard, and that's the one thing Honey won't do. At my age one bruises so easily."

"Honey?"

"Lee Wayne Hunnicut. Went to school here in the sixties, played football. No scholar, but he tried hard. Then he went off to the service—Vietnam—but they sent him home. Honey hasn't been the same since—can't tolerate pressure. But he has a disability pension, and he does lawns and odd jobs, painting, just about anything—but he won't pull the grass from under the fence!"

They drank in silence and

Ray studied the framed drawings and the print over the fireplace. He wished he knew more about art, had the feeling these were artists he should recognize. He'd buy a book when he got home.

"Miss Ellerby, didn't James Tilbury do *anything* right?"

She retreated behind her glasses, thinking. "Well, yes, he did get the bond issue passed for the new elementary school. But the new state law about maximum class size forced the issue."

"So they kept him on—even though he was a disaster."

"Of course. They had to. For one thing, it was a matter of pride—it doesn't slide down easily, and some of the board members had fought so hard to get him, they just couldn't admit they'd been wrong. And the money—we're not a rich district. They would have had to buy up his contract, and it had nearly two years to run."

"Then they could have waited out the two years and not rehired him."

"Yes. And in the meantime—"

"He could have done a lot of damage." She jerked her head up, down, in quick agreement. "Such as?"

She sighed and set her cup down, settled her glasses on her nose, spoke hesitantly. "Ray, you must understand that a dis-

strict gets its reputation largely from the high school—the band, football, basketball, all the athletic teams, the speech and drama and other competitions—and that would be where the new superintendent would begin to—make his presence felt. Mr. Tilbury found a great deal to criticize in many areas—from the top down.”

“You mean—fire the principal? Mr. Henning?”

“I heard Mr. Tilbury had a friend he wanted in the job. Avery Henning is one of the finest, most dedicated educators I have ever known. His home is here—where could he start over at his age? And Chuck Ninne-man—so his team doesn’t go to the finals. He runs a splendid program, teaches those kids values and sportsmanship and decency. As for Asa DeWitt, why, the band hall is home for any kid with a problem. His band ranks very high, but that wasn’t good enough for our Mr. T. And there were others.”

Ray had caught the intensity in her voice, her distress. “Tilbury really ‘left his mark’ on you.”

“These are my friends, people I know. They’re dedicated, good—and their lives were being disrupted, destroyed—for one man’s ego.”

Ray stared at the picture over the fireplace, straining to read the signature.

“Miss Ellerby, if James Tilbury didn’t just fall off that bridge—if someone helped him over the side—you’ve just suggested a number of possibilities to me.”

“Yes, I know.” Ray was surprised again, a little let down; he’d expected a shocked protest. “But you would hear this anyway, and I’d rather you hear it from me. You see, I’m absolutely convinced that James Tilbury’s death was an accident.”

He wished he had the police report here; he wanted to read it again.

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But I’m still curious. An unpleasant, powerful man, plenty of motive, a timely misstep—isn’t it all just a little too—”

“Coincidental? Perhaps, but don’t forget—there *is* a reason the word exists.”

The sun was low and the air no warmer late on Friday afternoon when Ray arrived at Miss Ellerby’s, uninvited, but, he was sure, not unexpected. There was no response to his knock, either from within or from the back yard. He retraced his steps across the manicured lawn to the drive and around to the gate in the chain fence; there were no untidy grass fringes that he could see all along its length. Then he saw her emerging from

the ravine—first just her head, then the rest of her as she climbed the sparsely wooded slope. At the back gate she called, and a dark, shaggy dog bounded through the opening, wheeled, and began to run in happily aimless patterns, scouting his territory. He spotted Ray just as Miss Ellerby raised a hand in greeting, motioning him into the yard, and the creature shot toward him, all ferocity and noisy yapping.

Henry the Eighth was less impressive than his name—a medium-sized, longhaired black mongrel with watchful, intelligent eyes, golden-brown ears and legs, and a curled plume of a tail. He sniffed at Ray's shoes, wagged his acceptance, and ambled off to complete his interrupted inspection.

Miss Ellerby led him into the house. "Henry's been digging out again. I thought I'd fixed it, but I'll just have to get Honey to patch on a row of wire. But I did double duty—as long as I had to go looking for him, I picked up some wood for a fire—not much, of course, the animals need it, but Honey hasn't brought my firewood yet. What do you say to the first fire of the season, and—tea, is it?"

He took the canvas carrier from her and hefted the load of arm-thick branches. "Not a very big fire, I'm afraid, but yes, I'd like that—and tea."

She refused his offer of help with either, and he sank gratefully into a chair before he remembered he had planned a closer look at the picture over the fireplace.

"You were quite busy today. I saw you several times at the school." She set the tea before him and busied herself with arranging the puny logs on the grate.

"Miss Ellerby, you held out on me," he accused. He took the notebook from his pocket and flipped the pages.

"Oh, really? I thought I was being discreet."

He referred to his notes. "James Tilbury left his house, as he usually did, between six thirty and six forty-five—that's according to Mrs. Annaruth Mims across the street."

"My mother's cousin."

"On Pine he jogged by several people—out getting the paper—didn't speak to any of them. After that no one saw him until Mrs. Scheffel—and you know what happened after that."

"Took you all day to find that out?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "Avery Henning, the man Tilbury wanted to replace, had a church breakfast meeting at seven, but he was cooking, so he left his house about six fifteen. Chuck Ninneman told his wife he had some things to do

at the gym; he left her in bed, but she thinks it was around six thirty, six forty-five. Willard Roman in the Math Department walked down Pine, across the bridge, to meet Bill Weems and Hector Sorbino—they jogged—for breakfast at the Pancake Palace. They do that once or twice a week. Millicent Ayres walked her dog over to the high school about six thirty. Asa DeWitt said he was going to the band hall early—good grief! Doesn't anybody sleep in this town?"

Miss Ellerby put a last broken branch on the minuscule fire and straightened. "I said it was an early riser's town."

He ran a hand over his face and said tiredly, "Well, there *were* a couple of things that bothered me."

"Ray, Tilbury fell—an accident. You're stirring things up needlessly."

He ignored her remark. "Gloria Eberhardt—boy, I don't remember that we had teachers like that in my high school. Mr. Roman said he saw her driving through town. She got pretty upset with me, told me she had a—personal errand."

"Yes, I know. She came to my room at lunch."

"A girl like her—what is she doing here? Why is she teaching?"

It was her turn to ignore his implications, but he caught her

narrowed glance. "Gloria likes teaching, likes it here. She's going to marry Dennis Heilmann—as soon as he gets his divorce." She sighed. "Dennis was rather—wild—as a boy, had a mean temper. And he married very young. His wife left him a number of years ago and he sort of drifted—until Gloria. He's started a business now, but things take time. Meanwhile, sometimes Gloria—well, you know."

"Spends the night at his place."

"Please don't make things harder for her. She needs her job." She affected a noncommittal tone. "Tilbury found her—very attractive."

He digested that, filed it away. Miss Ellerby poked at the dying fire.

"Something else—Lee Wayne Hunnicut had a run-in with Tilbury last spring and Tilbury called the police. Had him charged with trespassing—something about your dog, Miss Ellerby."

"Yes." She nodded. "That's right. Henry got out and took off, and Honey went after him, caught up with him blocks from here in James Tilbury's yard. Tilbury claimed Henry had turned over some flower pots, kicked him, I don't know what all. I took care of it—it *was* my responsibility."

Ray slapped the little note-

book shut, replaced it in his pocket, and slid down in the chair, lacing his fingers behind his head. He concentrated on the print, the separate daubs and splotches of color that somehow formed themselves into a garden vista. One side of his mouth pulled up in disgust.

"Well, that's just dandy! That seems to make it unanimous."

Miss Ellerby lifted her elegant sweated shoulders in a gesture of helplessness and then leaned forward, tense and earnest. "Ray, remember learning about the witch hunts of the seventeenth century? Those pious, well-intentioned people chose the proof they wanted and found their witches—because they were convinced they existed! Isn't that rather what you're doing? Isn't it possible that James Tilbury wasn't liked *and* died in an accident?"

He didn't answer for a moment. Then his voice was conversational, offhand. "You saw the body before the police arrived. Did you notice an abrasion behind the right ear? There was very little blood, some bark and debris stuck there, according to the investigation report."

Her eyes opened wide. "Heavens, Ray! The man was covered with scrapes and cuts and litter. It's a long way down!"

"He *could* have been struck from behind."

"He *could*—and probably

did—bounce off a tree limb!"

"He was found face down."

She snorted. "Who knows *how* he started out? He certainly couldn't drop like a rock—not through all those trees growing in the ravine."

He had a sudden image of Miss Ellerby squatting beside the fireplace, feeding the scavenged branches into the flames. "You're quite convinced, Miss Ellerby, that it was an accident. What makes you so sure?"

"I have no proof, if that's what you mean. It's just that—" He had shaken her certainty. "I don't know what happened exactly, but I *do* know these people here. They're my friends, people I've shared my life with, and I—"

His eyes traveled down the slim, jean-clad legs to the thick-soled jogging shoes, and he finished it for her: "—take a two-mile walk every morning—over that bridge."

Henry the Eighth's frenzied barking must have alerted Evelyn Ellerby to his presence because she showed no surprise to find Ray waiting in the cold half-light of early morning. His hands were jammed into the pockets of his parka, the hood snuggled low over his forehead, up around his chin. Her grey fleece jogger intensified the silver of her hair, the open blue

jacket echoed her unfaded blue eyes. She looked trim and fit, and far more alert than he felt.

"You'll have to speed it up. Doesn't do your heart any good if you stroll."

Ray obediently lengthened his stride and tried to synchronize his pace with hers; six steps later he was off-beat again, lagging, and double-stepped to bring himself even with her. He realized the absurdity of their progress and would have laughed if he'd had breath enough.

A block ahead a black-jacketed figure trotted across the intersection, throwing a wave in their direction, and disappeared behind a house. "Weems," Miss Ellerby said, as she acknowledged his greeting. Farther down the street, another figure, pumping arms and legs, receded. She motioned with her chin: "Chuck Ninneman."

Her merciless rhythm never faltered, not even as she rounded the corner toward the bridge; Ray, on the outside, fell into a lope. At the edge of the pavement, he dropped behind to let her lead the way and finally abandoned the effort. When she halted at the bridge and looked back, he grinned sheepishly and plodded toward her.

"It goes easier if you breathe through your nose. Gets more oxygen to the muscles."

He nodded, unwilling to risk a breathless answer, certain she could hear the knocking in his chest. He wasn't a bit warmer, either.

The weathered timbers of the bridge, napped and greenish, were less than six feet across. Low railings on either side, thirty-four inches high (Ray had measured), were affixed to uprights three feet apart. Fallen leaves formed a thick mat underfoot, a moist and spongy layer of rotting vegetation hidden beneath an ever-renewed covering—brittle, lobed oak leaves and papery, hand-sized sycamore, limp mini-fronds of elm, black scatter-shot kernels of tallow and acorn caps. In the middle the way was relatively clear, the drifts piled along the edges. Ray wondered who would design a bridge with railings so low he couldn't lean.

Miss Ellerby read his thoughts. "My father used scrap lumber; it was for the children, as I said. Since then somebody just patches it when it needs fixing, but it's never been completely redone."

He stepped closer to the edge, putting his feet down squarely, feeling the topmost leaves slide under his feet. He stared down through the nearly naked branches below, down to the rounded mounds of rock outcroppings in the ancient stream

bed. The morning sun had not yet reached those depths, barely lit the tops of the trees on either side.

"Miss Ellerby, I didn't sleep much last night. I have to decide today whether to let this go or to request an official, full-scale investigation into Tilbury's death."

"I thought somehow you were bent on the latter."

"No, it didn't start out that way at all. I came here as a—favor; somebody pulled some strings. I thought it would be cut and dried, and everybody would be happy, and that would be the end of it. Now, I don't know." He rubbed his icy hands together; Miss Ellerby balanced easily beside him, oblivious of discomfort.

"I think you make too much of what you think you've found. You think you've found motives—plural—for murder, but murder is a desperate act. Have you measured the strength of those motives? There are usually alternate methods of handling even the worst of situations—and most people recognize that."

"That's just it! Too many people, too many motives—probably some I haven't even discovered."

"Ray, why can't you just accept that—"

There was only the swish of

leaves and the hollow drumming of padded feet on the wooden bridge an instant before the black and golden shape hurtled between them, ears flying, plumed tail streaming, the autumn-hued leaves swirling in his wake. Ray half-turned, startled. Then he was falling, the thin, sere leaves slipping, his right foot digging for stability in the moldered ooze below, and he knew with frightening clarity that his momentum would carry him over the railing, into space, crashing through the trees—Desperately, he bent his left knee, pitched to the side, and clutched at the arm reaching out to him.

"—it was an accident," she finished.

Crouching there, shaken, he heard her voice, distorted by the blood pounding in his ears. Over his fingers gripping her forearm, he read in her eyes the confirmation of the astonished question in his, and he knew—he *knew*, could almost see—how James Tilbury had fallen to his death.

He snickered, wonderingly, and then he was laughing, deep-chested, uncontrollable laughter that mingled relief and disbelief with an overtone of hysteria. It was joined in unconscious duet by Miss Ellerby's clear soprano peals, amplified in the chill, still air,

and the sound reverberated against the sides of the ravine, through the trees, and carried up and out and away.

Ahead of them, Henry the Eighth ranged through the fallen leaves and scrub, nosing his erratic way in a meandering loop down the slope to the rocks below. At the bottom he paused, head cocked, listening, and looked up through the branches at the two figures on the bridge, and his gaping jaws and lolling tongue mimicked a satisfied smile.

At the first school board meeting of the next fall term, the assembly room was packed, but Miss Evelyn Ellerby wasn't there, was, in fact, on a walking tour of the Yorkshire dales. The new superintendent of schools, Av-

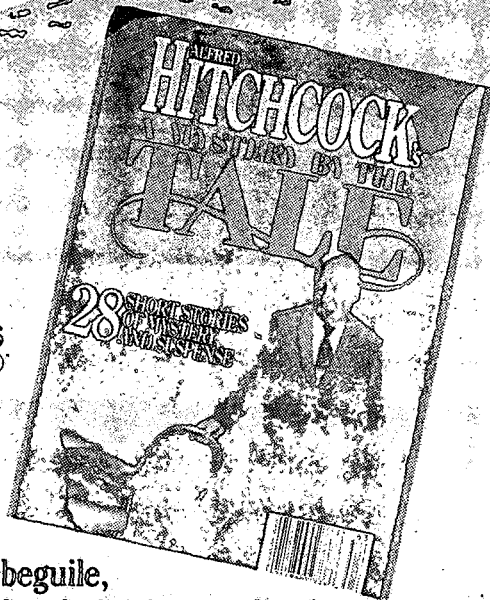
ery Henning, read a petition (initiated by the high school faculty but signed by over two thousand registered voters) requesting that the new elementary school be named for a long-time teacher, Evelyn Ellerby. So confident was everyone of its acceptance that the next item on the agenda was the unveiling and presentation of a portrait of Miss Ellerby to hang in the foyer of the school. The photographer had caught her strength and grace and wit as she gazed into nothingness over the head of the tawny-eared dog that leaned adoringly against her.

A small engraved brass plaque on the lower rim of the frame read simply: "In grateful recognition of your contribution to education." It was as close as they could come.

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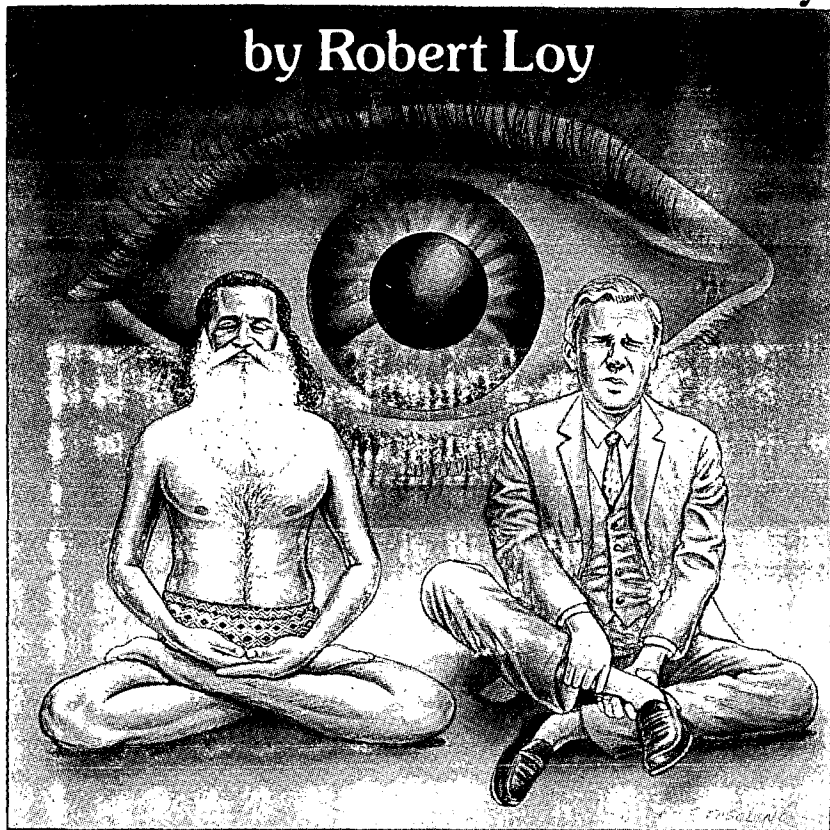
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Swami Ramananda and the Private Eye

by Robert Loy



I had been sitting for several decades it seemed, and every part of me was either aching, itchy, or numb. The muscles—fat, if you must—in my posterior were Rip Van Winkle-tsetse fly-*Dynasty* rerun asleep. I kept expecting to hear them snore. Each time I—oh so gently—shifted position, trying

to get some relief, all I did was shut off the blood flow to a different vital area of my body.

Finally I gave it up as a loss, opened my eyes, and reached down to unlock my ankles.

Swami Ramananda's faraway brown eyes were staring through me. Mockingly? Compassionately? Who can tell? The

smile—if you could call it that—always fluttering around his mouth but never landing was so enigmatic it made Mona Lisa look like the Cheshire cat.

"Show me," he whispered.

Now, I make seventy-five thousand bucks a year. Each and every day of my life I rub schnozzes with guys so hard-nosed they could mine granite with their olfactory organs, and I have no problem handling the friction. But a half-naked, shriveled-up old man from Katmandu makes me feel like the world's biggest boob every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday afternoon from twelve thirty to two o'clock. And I pay him a hundred and twenty-five dollars an hour to do it.

Like now, for instance. He knew something was on my mind, something was messing up my concentration so I couldn't meditate; but instead of asking "What's bothering you? Can I help?," the way you or I or any other half-sane earth resident would, he sits there with his feet crossed and tucked under his armpits and says "Show me."

"Show you what, mister—I mean, uh, Sri Ramananda?"

"Some wondrous roadside attraction has pulled you from the path to Nirvana. To be more desirable than unalloyed bliss, it must truly be the bee's pa-

jamás. Share this delight with your guru."

I smiled, but inside I was cussing Dr. Blanton for putting me—me, a *Forbes* coverboy—here at the none-too-clean feet of what Johnny Carson used to call "a weird holy man." It was not the good sawbones' fault, of course, but I had to blame somebody. I mean, you really can't get mad at your own blood vessels.

Once a year I make everybody who works for me get a complete physical examination, myself included—purely as a formality, of course, to keep me from feeling like a hypocrite.

Except that this year Doc Blanton told me my arteries were as clogged as the road to Disneyland on the Fourth of July.

"How did that happen?" I asked. It sounded like insubordination to me. Who told my arteries they could lie down on the job like that?

"You're fifty pounds overweight," Dr. Blanton told me. "You're a workaholic, and you smoke like you're on fire. You think aerobics is the type of gas they use to fill disposable lighters. You eat too much fat and you worry too much."

"But . . . but . . . but . . ." was the most intelligent response I could think of. I had never

given my arteries a whole lot of thought, you see. Naturally I had noticed all the health articles in the paper lately, but all they meant to me was just more pages to riff through before I got to the financial section. "You're kidding me, right, doc?"

Dr. Blanton shook his gray head.

"What should I do?"

"Lose weight. Don't work so hard. Quit smoking and start exercising. Eat less fat and stop worrying so much."

I plucked a wicked-looking doohickey from the doctor's metal tray and placed its blade to my wrist.

"I'd rather do it this way, doc, and get it over with quick."

"Okay, but at least let's work on the last two," he said. "I'll give you a dietary guidelines sheet; the hardest thing for you will probably be the loss of red meats." (To show how little I knew about health and diet, I disagreed with the doctor—I figured giving up red meat would be no problem at all, since I liked my steaks well-done anyway.)

"As far as the stress goes," he went on, "I suppose a man in your position can't very well avoid it completely, but you can minimize its effects. Jog, ride a bicycle, play golf. Find something that relaxes you, helps you unwind."

"How about good twelve-year-old scotch? That relaxes me."

"How about a heart attack before your next birthday?"

I wanted to take Doc Blanton's advice, but jogging and bicycling and golf and all that seemed too strenuous to be very relaxing. So when I saw Swami Ramananda's ad for "Stress Reduction Without Muscle Movement," I jumped to John Hancock the dotted line, never dreaming what a physically demanding sport muscle stillness could be.

I'd been coming to Sri Ramananda's ashram for three and a half months now, and already I'd noticed a lot of improvement in my ability to handle stress. The meditations and deep-breathing techniques he taught me really worked in spite of my initial skepticism. Don't get me wrong, I still worry and get tense—plenty. But now I wait until I have something to get worried and tense about.

The swami's lessons had helped me in other ways, too. My memory, never any great shakes except for when it came to business, had improved quite a bit. (Although I had forgotten the gym bag that contained my asana suit again today and was once more risking rupture by attempting a full lotus posture in my double knit slacks.)

So the meditation and all that was blue-chip in my book,

but the diet, the no red meat thing, I wasn't so sure about. Today I had finally worked up enough courage to ask Sri Ramananda for a second opinion.

"What your doctor say do, do," he said. "Doctor say diet is good for your arteries, diet is good for your arteries. Anyone, even your humble guru, can see such a diet is good for cows' arteries, which is more benefiting to your health in the long running."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "A cow's arteries are more important than mine? I don't follow you."

"Meditate on it."

And I tried to, I really did. But, like I said already, all I got out of it was the intermediate stages of rigor mortis. I already knew from experience there was no point in trying to hide anything from Ramananda, so I painfully untied my legs and said:

"Something's distracting me from Nirwhatchamacallit all right, but it's not a glorious something. One of my most trusted employees is a thief and a traitor."

I waited for some sort of response, but I didn't get one and so I went on.

"I don't know if I've ever told you this, Sri Ramananda, but I am the president of Cochran Commodities International."

I didn't get any reaction to

this announcement, either. I didn't expect Ramananda to ooh and ah or anything.—Nepalese swamis being notoriously unimpressed by even the most dazzling vista from the corporate ladder—but a nod or an uh-huh, something to show that he had assimilated the information, would have been nice.

Nothing. If they made skinny, brown, big-nosed mannequins sitting in lotus and wearing nothing but a blanket and a maybe-smile, I would have sworn I was baring my soul to a department store dummy.

"Right—well—anyway, about six months ago Congress cut off all diplomatic and trade relations with a certain South African country whose government is reported to be—no—is racist. Racist, but also one of Cochran's best customers. We—that is, I—did not stop trading with this country when the embargo was passed. In fact, it wasn't until three weeks ago that I informed them not to expect any more shipments."

I didn't see any reason to mention the fact that it was something Ramananda said that convinced me to stop violating international law. ("Why should I concern myself with a man's—or even a country's—morals?" I'd asked, beating guiltily around the bush. "All I need to be concerned with is their

money." "Oh, so there is a difference," said Ramananda, his brown eyes dancing and slicing. "Please enlighten your guru; he thought they were inseparable.") You can never tell how he's going to take something and I was in a hurry to get this part of the story over with.

"A circuitous method of paper shuffling and red tape management allowed me to keep the violation a secret from my employees, but unfortunately I came down with a dose of the Richard-Nixon-Secret-Tapes Syndrome." I shook my head, still disgusted by my mad-nesses. "A sheaf of papers pertaining to the embargo violation, listing exactly what Cochran shipped and when, I kept. God only knows why. I held them in my hands, and I knew—I knew—I should burn them. But I didn't. I filed them. For some crazy, idiotic reason I'll never understand, I—"

"When a man has covered himself with soot there is no reason for that man to continue raking himself over coals."

I looked at Ramananda. He waited without blinking.

"A couple of days ago I discovered the papers were missing. Stolen."

"Papers, fah." Ramananda dismissed all the descendants of parchment and papyrus with an airy wave of his hand. "Pa-

pers are but pressed wood pulp. Here today, gone today." He untangled himself and stood up—without even stopping to work out any kinks.

"Yeah, but these particular papers could run my company out of business and land me in the federal hoosegow."

"In that case there is only one thing to do."

"What? Tell me." I couldn't see where there was anything to be done, but time had taught me that Ramananda usually had the answers—if you could only interpret them.

"Have a cup of tea and try to penetrate this blessing's disguise." He floated over to the kitchenette and put on water for tea—or what he calls tea; it's greenish yellow and tastes like liquid lettuce.

I snorted. "Sri Ramananda, this is not a blessing in disguise. This is gift-wrapped doom. It's Armageddon. It's Ragnarok. It's—"

"It's an opportunity to pay off a karmic debt. Karmic debts must be paid." Ramananda filled a couple of battered tea balls from an old brown tin. "You take sugar?"

"You have sugar?"

"No. Just curiousness. Forgive your guru."

The water boiled and the swami brought me a cup of hot, green, unsweetened "tea." Since

there was no table—or any other furniture—to set it on, I sat back down on the floor with it, ignoring my thighs' screams of protests.

Ramananda circled back to the subject of karmic debts—one of his favorites.

"Better to pay now than after much interest has accrued, eh?"

"Yeah, well, I'm afraid I'm going to have to default on this one. I've already filled my side of the scales with so much guilt and remorse if it's not balanced yet it never will be. And, believe it, whichever one of my 'trusted' employees stole those papers has something a hell of a lot worse than trade violations planned. Three o'clock this morning the phone rings and a heavily-muffled voice advises me to 'Resign before it's too late.' So you can see why I'm having a little trouble meditating."

"No," said Ramananda, "you overestimate your guru's humble eyesight. The only why he can see is why you now need meditation more than ever." He lapped up his green tea like it was heavenly nectar. Mine had twigs floating in it.

I shook my head.

"Then confront the thief."

Ramananda shifted position so that he now sat with his bony knees straight out in front of his body, legs bent and feet

pulled up close to his side. The one time I tried sitting like that I was terrified somebody was going to mistake me for a wishbone. "End the karma."

"Oh, sure." I laughed. There was nothing else to do. "How am I supposed to confront the thief when I don't know who the thief is. I'm not a detective, you know."

"Detectives you don't need," said Ramananda. "Every thief carries the goods he misappropriated forever on his back. It is a burden he can never be rid of."

I thought—or I guess you could say meditated—about that for a few seconds, but got exactly nowhere with it. If somebody at the office had recently started walking with a stoop maybe I would have had something. As it was . . .

"Too much," said Ramananda. "You watch with your eyes, listen with your ears, and think with your brain too much. You must learn to use your third eye." He touched his forehead between and slightly above his bushy eyebrows. "Your private eye. The one that sees the invisible."

What a shame, I thought, that God or Krishna or Whoever it was that put me together did such a slipshod job. My bones don't bend and I was issued only two eyes. I took a tiny sip of tea

and tried not to look too stupid.

"Are you telling me I ought to be able to *see* who took my papers?" I asked, when it became obvious Ramananda was not planning to give me any more information about his theory. "Just by looking at—at what? The way they walk?"

"The way he walks. The way he talks. The way he breathes. Everything the thief does and everything the thief says will scream out one message: 'I took your pieces of pressed wood pulp. Oh, please, Mr. President of Cochran Commodities International, please, take this burden from my shoulders! It is more than I can bear.' The Atman—the Godspark—within him will force him to do this. He will have no choice."

"I don't know," I said, trying to keep the disappointment out of my voice. "I can't see it myself."

"Of course you cannot see it," said Ramananda. "Use your private eye." He tapped his forehead again. "Then will you see?"

"Well, maybe I'll give it a try." I pushed back my sleeve and looked at my watch. I should have been back at work eighteen minutes ago. "But right now I've got to be—"

"Sit down," Ramananda commanded. "Where do you think you go? I'm supposed to send

you back to your desk stress-reduced, not insect-eyed. Sit. Listen to the infinite Aum."

"I'd like to, but—"

"Sit."

Sigh. I sat.

If you've ever tried to argue with a Nepalese swami you'll understand why.

What happened next happened fast and that's the way. I'm going to tell it.

All the way back to the office I thought about what Ramananda had told me about using the third eye—supposedly the source of intuition and omnipresent perception—to catch a thief. I had a hard time swallowing it—even with several hefty grains of salt. Not that I didn't believe him; I did, sort of. It was just that everything he told me always sounded completely incomprehensible at first, and then either turned out to be true or remained incomprehensible. So, while I didn't think the swami was talking through his turban or anything, I was confused as to what to do with advice that I couldn't make head nor tail out of.

I had to find the thief one way or another. That much was certain. If I didn't, I would lose everything I had worked so hard to build—not to mention my liberty. But I didn't have to

catch him the swami's way. I had plenty of other options.

Like what?

Well, I supposed I could always fire everyone who had had even the remotest opportunity to snatch the papers. That would get the thief out of my hair and cost only two innocent people their livelihoods.

Three people. The only three people in the world I trusted. And one of them was out to ruin me.

Bill Oberprell? No way. Besides being my best friend, Bill was vice-president of Cochran. He must have known that if this embargo violation stuff hit the fan no jury in the world would believe he wasn't in on it. If Bill had found those papers, he'd have done what I should have done—burned them and flushed the ashes.

Florence Tamm, my personal secretary and Cochran's receptionist on those rare occasions when we needed a receptionist? Not unless there was some criminal mastermind behind this, which I doubted. Florence was a good secretary, but I couldn't see her doing *anything* without explicit instructions—preferably in triplicate.

Sam Matheson? Well, at least Sam had a motive—sort of. He was always saying how he could do my job, how he was underpaid and underappreciated in

his role as public relations director, plant safety inspector, and general jack of all trades, and how he should have been either promoted or committed years ago. But Sam wouldn't steal; he was too play-it-by-the-book. He wanted my job, yes, but he wanted to earn it from me, not blackmail me out of it.

When I got back to the office Florence was still out to lunch, but there were two surprises waiting for me.

A note on my desk read: *Urgent I see you ASAP—Sam*

And the author of that note lay crumpled on the floor by my desk, his head in a widening pool of blood.

You could tell they didn't really like the idea, but the police allowed us to open for business the next day. I'd spent the night at the hospital pacing for Sam, answering questions for the police, and, whenever I tried to sleep, having nightmares about being chased by South African papers with blood-dripping fangs.

Somewhere between three A.M. and my sixteenth cup of coffee, the doctors brought us the news about Sam. He was going to be all right. He'd need to get a hat a couple of sizes larger than usual to wear for a while, but he was all right. He'd

even regained consciousness long enough to tell the cops he hadn't seen who hit him.

Only one surprise greeted me the next morning at the office, but it was a doozy. Somebody had slipped past the security guard and the police, who had promised to keep an eye on things, and completely trashed the place. Chairs sliced, desks overturned, the file cabinets' guts ripped out and strewn across the floor. Whoever did it hadn't been looking for anything—they didn't have to, they already had it. No, this was my punishment for not giving in and resigning—the beginning of my punishment, anyway. There would be more. Lots more.

"That's it!" I shouted. You can't defeat an invisible enemy, and the only way to get out of the game with any skin still on your bones is to lay your cards on the table—face up.

Which is what I did as soon as Bill and Florence arrived.

"—and while I deeply regret what I did, there is no way I can go back in time and undo it. I would really appreciate any suggestions either of you might have as to what I should do now," I concluded.

Dead silence.

Florence looked like the poster girl for cardiogenic shock. Bill picked microscopic specks

of lint off his pants and flicked them into space.

I, on the other hand, felt like a million yen. Confession—combined with certain yogic deep-breathing techniques—really is good for the soul. Now if I could just get my third eye cranked up.

"I have to confess that I . . ." Bill stopped and went back to work on the invisible lint.

"Yes?"

"Well, it's just that I think it's a bit nervy of you to come asking for help now that it's all over. You didn't choose to let anybody in on your decision to violate the embargo so why—?"

"Why don't I just shut up and lie in the bed I've made? Is that it, Bill?" I concentrated on my forehead, trying to get that extra eye to open, but all that happened was my first two eyes crossed.

Bill couldn't bear to look at them. "I didn't say that," he said as he turned to examine something fascinating on the floor beside a smashed typewriter.

"How about you, Flo? Do you agree with Bill? Do you think I should stop fighting and take my licks?"

"Well, sir—I—uh—" I didn't need three eyes to see that Florence was scared. "I really don't think it's up to me to say. I'm—I'm very sorry."

I sighed, leaned back, and lit my first cigarette in a week and a half. I didn't know what I had expected, but I sure knew I was disappointed. If either of these people was trying to tell me they took my pieces of pressed wood pulp, they needed to speak up. I wasn't hearing a thing.

"Neither of you has anything else to say?" I asked. "I really need some help on this."

Nothing. The room was so quiet you could have heard a career shatter.

"Okay. I guess it's too late for me. But maybe it's not too late for Cochran." I pushed myself away from my desk. "Florence, would you please bring me my personnel file and the executive release form—Form AC 389, I think it is—and a steno pad?"

Neither Bill nor I said a word during the half-minute she was gone.

Swami Ramananda stopped me when I got to this part of the story.

I had felt like I needed to talk to somebody after I finished filling out papers and before I cleaned out my desk. He had agreed to see me when I called, even though it wasn't my usual day.

"And you bottled her on the spot, am I correct?" he asked.

"Bottled?" I stopped pacing—I hadn't even attempted a lotus

today; as dizzy as I felt, I didn't think I'd be able to get myself out of one. "Oh, you mean canned. Who? Florence?"

Ramananda did not nod, smile, or speak. But I could tell by the way he sat that yes, he meant Florence.

"Of course not." I resumed pacing. "Why should I fire Florence?"

Ramananda shut his eyes. I ambulated while he meditated.

"You're right. You should not fire her," Ramananda said at last. "Thank you for reminding your guru of the great virtue in mercy."

"Are you trying to say Florence took the—"

Ramananda levitated, his skinny brown legs uncurling themselves as he did so.

"Tea?"

"Sure," I said, too preoccupied to hear the screams emanating from my intestines. I asked Ramananda again if he meant to say that Florence took the papers as I followed him to the kitchenette.

"Didn't you hear her tell you this?"

Never a straight answer. I swear I don't see how they ever get any business done in Nepal.

He put water on and, so he'd have fewer excuses for stalling, I got the cups from the cupboard and filled the tea balls.

"No," I said, trying to catch

the swami's eye and not coming anywhere near it. "I didn't hear her tell me this. When did she say it?"

He muttered some Nepalese curse over the tea and said:

"No doubt your guru is wrong. No doubt he has misinterpreted her—"

"No doubt he's going to be a dead guru if he doesn't—" I stopped and forced myself to breathe deep. I expected a lecture from Ramananda on even-mindedness, but I got a cup of tea and a cryptic smile instead.

"One half of one minute is what you said it took for this Florence to fetch the form you required."

I'd like to be able to say that the light dawned at this point, but the truth is it didn't even flicker.

"Yes? So?"

"So files were scattered from there to here, yet she finds this form—a form you cannot use often, since you were unsure of its title and your memory is faultless when it comes to business concerns—in one half of one minute. What does this say?"

I couldn't answer; I was in shock. I took a big gulp of tea, hoping it would revive me, and turned my esophagus to ashes.

"Seen through the third eye, this action has but one interpretation: 'I know where this

obscure form is because I want to make you retire and so kept it separate when I scattered your office. Apprehend me. Please don't make me get away with this.'"

"But—but—that doesn't prove she took the papers to start with. It doesn't prove she hit Sam. It doesn't *prove* anything. She might have been forced to tear up the office or she might be covering up for somebody or—"

"Upon the contrary," said Ramananda. "She was the only person who had reason to do these things."

"Reason? What reason?" I downed the rest of my tea to keep from throwing it in his face.

"In my country we have a saying—of course everything is entirely not the same in Nepal. Tell none of your lady friends I say this. I want no bras burning in the ashram, please. We say, a man will commit a crime for any of many reasons, but a woman sins only for love."

"Love?" Florence, the human filing machine, in love? "Could it—? You mean Bill?"

"No, dim one," said Ramananda. "You."

"Me? Why would she love me?"

My guru shrugged his bony shoulders. "Beats me."

He rinsed out the cups, floated

over to the corner of the main room, and squatted by my gym bag. After rummaging around in it for a couple of seconds, he pulled out several sheets of folded foolscap.

"Here are your pieces of pressed wood pulp," he said.

I looked around the room, but there was nothing soft to fall on, so I didn't faint. I settled for staring blankly while my mouth hung open.

"Ah, I see you need to meditate." Ramananda pulled up his straw mat and sat in front of me. "Descend. You can't properly meditate standing up like that."

"I don't want to meditate." But I sat down anyway. "I want answers. How did—"

"Meditate," said Ramananda. "You will get all the answers you need."

"But not the answers I want. Sri Ramananda, how did you know where the papers were?"

Ramananda's brow wrinkled slightly as he stared intently at my forehead. Good luck if you're looking for a third eye, I would have told him if I'd had the strength to spare.

"Where else could they be?" he said, answering my question with a question again. "You remembered your pouch in despite of the fact you have much on your mind. Your secretary reminded you, am I correct?"

I nodded. It was all I could do.

"Why?" he asked. That question, thank God, was rhetorical. "When you realize that this secretary is inexplicably in love with you and stole the papers because she was worried about the stress you are under always; when you realize she only wanted you to retire to health and happiness, not blackmail and ruin; when you realize this was so important to her she was willing to take a chance on shattering Mr. Sam's skull when he discovered part of her secret, then you must see that her saying of 'I'm sorry' does not mean she regretted her inability to advise you, does it? She had just seen—with her private eye—you reject her gift of freedom from stress."

"You mean she was apologizing for stealing the papers?" I rubbed my forehead, not trying to get any more eyes to open—I'm convinced I'll never have more than two—but trying to get my brain to work. "But, why after all that—?"

"It didn't make you happy as she had hoped—quite un, in fact—so she changed her mind. In my country we say—well, never mind what we say. It is enough that people—especially female people—change their minds often. Florence changed hers and returned your precious papers."

My dizziness and confusion left me and were replaced by an overwhelming desire to get away from Ramananda and back to my love. Not Florence—it was going to take me a while to sort out my feelings there—but Cochran Commodities International. To sit in *my* chair behind *my* desk again and—

Ramananda must have read my mind.

"Stay," he ordered, just as I got to my feet. "Remember what blessed *Bhagavad-Gita* says: *He who is everywhere nonattached—neither joyously excited by good, nor disturbed by evil—has an established wisdom.*"

"Yeah, but—" An established wisdom was one thing, but I had an established business. A business that needed me.

"Sit. Meditate."

I sat. I meditated. I meditated until I fell over an enormous unanswered question.

"Sri Ramananda, I think I can understand how you figured out everything about the papers and Sam and all that. But how did you know Florence

was in love with me? How did you know her motives? You've never seen her, so how could your third eye have told you?"

He was slow to open his eyes, but when he did he actually smiled—for a tenth of a second.

"Sometimes the third eye is not enough, you are correct," he said. "For many of the details, Florence and your guru communicated via the third ear."

"The third ear?" Where would such an organ go? The third eye already had the best spot—the middle of the forehead—staked out. And how in the world did Florence get hers to work? "You never told me anything about a third ear."

"I didn't have to," Ramananda said. "You already know of it."

"You've got to be kidding. I was raised a Presbyterian, we don't go in for—"

"Here in America you call it a telephone," he told me. "Now be still inside and listen. Aum. Can you hear it? Same in every language. Aummmm."

As Ramananda raced toward Nirvana, I tiptoed out the back door of the ashram.

Down Lonesome Road

by Anita
McBride

The four-door Buick sedan inched its way between overhanging bushes, coming up the overgrown lane from Lonesome Road. Lucy Homulka was hanging out her lingerie on a line suspended between the side of the house and a pole set in a flowering honeysuckle bed. She wore a man's shirt with cut off sleeves tucked into faded bluejeans that hugged her full figure. The man who climbed out of the car was

almost fat, his stomach threatening to creep over his belt buckle. He wore a shortsleeved brown and white cotton shirt, and there was a blue sportcoat thrown over the back of the passenger seat.

Lucy took a clothespin from her mouth and pinned a frilly chemise to the line.

"Howdy, let me introduce myself." He came towards her and stopped a good ten feet away. "Rich Cowan, private in-

vestigator. I hope you can help me."

She hung up a diaphanous nightie by its skirt.

"I'm here on behalf of Intrepid Insurance and Oswald & Mifflin's Paints. A couple of O & M salesmen have disappeared into thin air in these parts and I've been hired to ask around."

She gave him a half smile and put one hand to her hip to knead the muscle there. "I'll be glad to sit a bit. Come on over to the porch and I'll get something cold to drink." She led the way to the screened porch at the front of the house where Cowan was left to himself on a glider while Lucy Homulka went inside for lemonade. Out front, Cowan could see glimpses of the county road, Lonesome Road, between the stands of ancient pear trees and wild crabapple and the grapevines that grew along a tumbledown wire fence. Beyond them, across the road, the blue river reflected the June morning sun. A scrappy little spitz examined him curiously from the front lawn's stubby grass and then lay down, his head on his crossed paws. A dog that might bite, Cowan thought.

"I heard something about a salesman," Lucy said as she carried out a tray with tall glasses and cocktail napkins. "So he hasn't turned up?"

"No, ma'am. No sign of Alan Pawlicki. He's the second salesman O & M has lost. Another chap, Paul Mishka, disappeared, last seen in your town, Tater, coupla years ago."

She settled herself on a chaise longue covered in a flowered fabric matching that of the glider and took a swallow of lemonade. Cowan watched the workings of her throat with appreciation. He sat up straighter in his chair.

"It's a strange coincidence, Mrs. Homulka. Two years ago, Mishka took an order for paint at the hardware store in Tater, which is what—about three miles north down Lonesome Road? Alan Pawlicki phoned the same store two weeks ago. He checked into Pete's Motel at Whitestream, eight miles south of here, at six o'clock P.M. That's the last seen of him. He got a call in his room at eight o'clock. Call was made from a public phone in town there. His car's missing, but all his stuff was left at the motel. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

Her large blue eyes met his over the rim of her glass.

"Most folks travel from Tater to Whitestream by way of the interstate, and maybe both these fellas did. Paul Mishka was last seen in Tater, Alan Pawlicki in Whitestream. They might, one or both, have taken this road,

Lonesome Road. Why's it called that?"

"This is Lonesome Farm. We were a long way out from Whitestream in my granddaddy's day. It was his farm. Before he died, it was divided into three parts. Howard Runfeldt calls his parcel a ranch." She had a slow, gentle way of speaking that was easy to listen to.

"So it was all your family's once. Who else lives on Lonesome Road?"

"Nobody north between Lonesome Farm and Tater, it's all state-owned. There's two farms south, Howard and Anissa Runfeldt next door about a mile down the road, and John Heiting, a bachelor, he's Anissa's brother, my husband's partner in the hardware store, he has the third farm. No one else all the way to Whitestream, four miles of empty land, all state-owned, and of course the Whitestream River is on the other side of the road so we're off to ourselves a bit.

"This will all be park one day." Her gesture swept from left to right down Lonesome Road. "It's not good farm land. We keep some horses and cattle, but this is pretty wild country with the mountains behind us and all." She held out her hand for his empty glass and set it on the floor beside her.

"I heard tell you got hurt in a train accident, got hurt real bad, and will collect a fair sum of money from the railroad, that right?"

"Seems like you heard a lot." She smiled to remove any sting. "Who you been talking to?"

"Sheriff Piper at Whitestream. He's an old friend of mine. I'm going to see Heiting next. That's your husband's partner, you said?"

At her nod, he thanked her and left, the spitz sniffing busily around his heels. She stood inside the screen door of the porch, her hand on the latch, and he felt her blue eyes on him as he drove down the overgrown, rutted lane to Lonesome Road.

In Tater, a town of not more than one thousand souls, Cowan opened the screen door of the hardware store to the jingle of a bell and picked his way down an aisle crowded chock-a-block with supplies. He found Heiting, a stockily built man with masses of prematurely gray hair, a mobile face with a wide clown's mouth, and big teeth, at the back sorting nails into boxes on long narrow shelves. "Rich Cowan," the investigator said, holding out his hand. "Did Sheriff Piper call you about me?"

"Yes, he called." Heiting

shook the proffered hand and led the way to a cramped, cluttered office. Pushing a pile of hardware manuals onto the floor, he invited his visitor to take a seat. "You want to hear about the O & M salesmen, that right?" He ended his question with a nervous laugh. "Well, Paul Mishka came in, routine call, this was almost two years ago, mind. I gave him my order for paint and off he went. It was early, eight A.M. on a beautiful June morning. The other guy, Pawlicki, two weeks ago he called me and I said what I needed in the way of paint." He crinkled up his face as though weighing the effect of his words on Cowan. "It was a peculiar call." His eyes grew round and his wide mouth formed a circle. "He was laughing, you see, this Pawlicki, laughing fit to kill. 'See you,' he says. Laughing, laughing, takes my order, says 'See you,' and hangs up. Of course I never did see him. Years back, some Pawlickis lived near Tater."

"I talked with Mrs. Homulka. She tells me you own the farthestmost farm on Lonesome Road, the closest one to White-stream. Live there alone, do you?"

"Yeah. All by my lonesome on Lonesome Road."

"Sheriff Piper told me that Mrs. Homulka will collect a

hefty sum of money from the railroad." Cowan crossed one pudgy leg over the other.

"Well," Heiting shifted his position and laced his fingers behind his head as if to embark on a favorite story, "the railroad wasn't at all satisfied that it was an accident, let alone their fault. Looked as though someone had tinkered with the crossing light so it wouldn't go on. There's no gate. Lucy was in the car all right, asleep in the passenger seat she says, but there's suspicion that old Armand wasn't. He claimed that the force of the crash tossed him into a ditch about fifty feet away. That's where he was when help came. Said he was knocked out. Railroad men claimed it wasn't the natural place for him to be. Lucy was in bad shape. She's getting a settlement, fifty thousand dollars."

"And the husband, Armand Homulka?"

"He gets two thousand dollars and is lucky he wasn't charged with attempted murder."

"That was pretty tough for Mrs. Homulka, wasn't it, thinking her husband wanted to murder her?"

Heiting took his arms down and stretched. "I don't think she ever thought that. She was really crazy about him. He could

make her think black was white,

that the railroad was up to she-nanigans, not wanting to pay."

"Had he taken out extra life insurance on Lucy?"

"No. Heh heh. I guess he just figured on suing the railroad, and he would have inherited the farm had she croaked. There's a standing offer for all our property from the state. Lucy was in the hospital for two months, and when she got back to the farm it wasn't long before he shipped out. Left town. And took all but fifty dollars of what the store had in the bank, took two thousand dollars, which made it tough on me, but I come out all right because the lazy bugger's not drawing a salary now."

"He still own half the store?"

"Yeah, worse luck. Heh heh. I hope he never comes back. Howard Runfeldt feels the same. Old Armand was making the moves on Howie's wife, little Anissa, she's my sister. They got the farm right next to Homulkas. The ranch, they call it."

"How did Anissa feel about Armand making moves on her?"

"Who knows? It wouldn't be her fault. All the guys always liked Anissa. Homulka had got in the habit of dropping in at the ranch. Just to talk, Anissa says, but old Howie didn't like it. Howie's up in the mountains half the time, keeps cattle up

there. He's a real outdoors kind of guy and some older than her. She was just a kid, eighteen, two years ago when Armand and Lucy got hit by the train, and Howie was fourteen years older, same as Armand and me. Old Howie sure didn't appreciate Armand hanging around his teenage wife."

"Pretty name, Anissa. I'll talk to Howard Runfeldt, see if he saw either of these missing men, Paul Mishka and Alan Pawlicki. What do you make of two O & M men going missing?"

"Somebody didn't like their paint. Heh heh."

A bell jingled as a customer opened the street door, and Cowan waved goodbye and picked his way carefully through the jungle of hardware supplies. Must be fifty years of this stuff, he marveled. Waste not, want not.

“**M**rs. Runfeldt?” Cowan could appreciate the protective feeling

that Heiting seemed to have toward the slight woman with long blonde hair who opened her house door to his knock. The old fashioned log house was set closer to the road than Lucy Homulka's. A flower bed hugged the foundation stone across the front, and tall evergreens shaded the rooftop. A pretty place. In

the distance, off behind the house, Cowan could see the dark mountains. A few inquisitive horses watched from the corral beside the house. Anissa Runfeldt ushered him into a cool, dim room, the blinds closed against the morning sun.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" she asked, her voice small and girlish and coaxing. "White or black?" One blonde eyebrow went up in question. Cowan, entranced, asked for white. She disappeared and came back with a cup for him and one for herself. He was prepared for a jolly tête-à-tête when she passed out of his line of vision into a hallway and called to her husband. A slim, bearded fellow wearing a cowboy hat joined them and gave Cowan a hearty handshake. "Heiting called. Said you'd be coming over," he said. "You just caught me. I'm fixing the fencing for winter grazing up back. I'll be gone for quite a spell."

"I hate being left alone," Anissa said, and pinned Cowan with a flirtatious eye. For gosh sakes, he thought, right in front of her husband, too. Little Anissa was something else.

Howard Runfeldt did not seem to notice. "I want to get started soon," he said to his guest, "so what do you want to know?"

Both the Runfeldts were friendly and hospitable, but

neither was helpful. Cowan told them his theory of the salesman taking Lonesome Road rather than the interstate to get from Tater to Whitestream. Both shook their heads. Neither had seen either salesman.

"When's the last time you saw Armand Homulka?" Cowan asked.

"Before the train accident," Howard said, but Anissa reminded him that Armand had dropped in to say goodbye not long after Lucy came home from the hospital. Lucy was going to get a divorce was the story.

Cowan thanked them and stood beside the log house with Anissa to watch Howie saddle a horse and ride off toward the mountains, his saddlebags bulging with foodstuffs. A brown hound dog raised a lazy head. "Wanta go?" Anissa asked, raking her fingers through his thick coat, but the animal closed his eyes and lay back.

As Cowan backed his car toward Lonesome Road, he wiggled his fingers in farewell to little Anissa, who watched with an amused, intimate smile. No wonder, he thought, that Armand had dropped in to talk. He caught himself smiling in the rear view mirror.

A glance at the dashboard clock reminded him that it was time for lunch, and he headed back to Tater. In the dusty little

town Cowan had a monsieur sandwich, grilled ham and cheese on a croissant, at a French cafe, incongruous but welcome, on Main Street.

As he made his way toward the back of Heiting's store, he marveled that someone hadn't been killed by falling merchandise, with boxes on high leaning out precariously over the narrow aisles. But probably Heiting could put his hand on every item in the store. He found the store owner reading a paperback romance, which he thrust into an open drawer when he sensed Cowan's presence. "Back so soon?" He pointed to the chair Cowan had occupied that morning.

"Tell me about Paul Mishka, the salesman who disappeared two years ago."

"Old Paul? You betcha. You ever hear of Paul Pry? That was our Paul, all right. That old geezer, not really old you understand, thirty-four like me, but that old geezer was a regular old woman for gossip."

Takes one to know one, Cowan thought.

"What did you talk about, you and Paul, on that last day that he was here?"

Heiting ran a hand through his mop of gray hair and scratched thoughtfully. "Gee, what did we talk about? Probably about Lucy and Armand

being in the car wreck with the train. It was a few weeks after it happened and Lucy was in the hospital at Whitestream and Armand didn't come back to the store here, just stayed by his lonesome on Lonesome Farm acting like he was hurt too, not just Lucy. The railroad guys were spreading nasty rumors as to how old Armand had tinkered with that crossing light. Fixed it so it wouldn't go on so it would be their fault, and deliberately put the car on the track. Good as called him a murderer, that he tried to murder Lucy. He'd worry a subject to death, old Paul would. Just loved getting his teeth into someone else's heartbreak. He had a mean streak.

"I never got married, you know, but I had a girl once, back in high school. Her family moved away and I got left on my lonesome. Well, Paul, when he came in he'd always ask had I got me another girl yet?" Heiting raised eyebrows very black in contrast to his gray hair. "Well, I hadn't. Wouldn't he have been surprised if I'd said yes. Mean devil." His wide mouth closed in a clenched grin. "'Have you found another girl yet?' He won't find another girl where he is, will he?" His face had turned an ugly red remembering Paul Mishka.

"Where do you think he is?"

"Where? What I hope is buried somewhere, got what he deserves, heh heh."

"What about the other salesman, Alan Pawlicki, the guy who was laughing all the time? Tell me everything you can remember about him."

Heiting's clown face screwed itself up in an effort at recall. "Let's see. I was sitting right here thinking about closing up. It was almost five o'clock. The phone rang." He looked into Cowan's intent, pale blue eyes that seemed bent on hypnotically dragging some precious nugget of remembrance from him. "I picked up the phone; he says, this Pawlicki, laughing, as how he is with O & M. I say fine, haven't seen an O & M salesman since Mishka. I tell him what I need and how he should come into the store the next day. He's laughing. And I ask his name." Heiting gave his nervous heh heh. "He keeps laughing. Says 'Pawlicki' and laughs. 'See you,' he says. And like I said before, I never saw him."

"Sheriff Piper talked to Personnel at O & M and they know nothing about Pawlicki's background. Everything he put on his job application was made up, except maybe his age, thirty-four."

"Same as Armand and me and Howie."

"Pawlicki had been working for them six months. Did you recognize the voice? Could Pawlicki be Armand Homulka?"

"Old Armand? You think it could have been him? That might explain why he was laughing, playing a trick on his slow-witted partner, 'cause that's how he thought of me. Yes, it could have been Armand, but why not go by his true name? What call did Homulka have to go call himself Alan Pawlicki?" His forehead wrinkled into a network of creases.

"I'd sure appreciate it if you'd give some thought to this. Can you come out to my motel in Whitestream tonight? I want to talk to Lucy again. Then you and I can put our heads together over a drink. You're not teetotal, are you?"

"I'll be there," Heiting said with a pleased showing of his large teeth. "Five thirty, heh heh."

Cowan left with Heiting's nervous chuckle echoing in his ears.

Cowan stood awkwardly, happily, by as his hostess folded the lingerie from the line into dainty piles on the dining room table. "Mrs. Homulka, excuse my asking, but believe me, I have to,"

he said almost timidly. "Did your husband try to kill you?"

"I hope not, but I couldn't live with my doubts, either. Can you understand that?" Her soft blue eyes were confiding. "I don't believe he could do such a vicious thing, leave me on the tracks asleep with a fifty thousand ton steel missile aimed at me." She shuddered and Cowan put a comforting arm for a moment around her shoulders. "And yet I couldn't let him stay on the farm afterwards. I couldn't sleep at night wondering."

She moved to the porch, beckoning him to follow, and sat on the glider, putting it into gentle motion from time to time with a ballet-slippered foot. He leaned against the wall, not daring to join her on the glider. "I started divorce proceedings as soon as he left, almost two years ago," she said in a soft low voice. "But he sent such loving letters and began to send me money. He wrote that he was working hard, which he never had before, never did much around the hardware store. Heiting kept that going. Still does. Armand sent me four, five hundred dollars a month, some months. I knew he was depriving himself to do that, poor fellow, and I let the divorce drop. It's not as though I wanted to marry again. And maybe he didn't try to harm

me. . . ." Her voice died away.

"He ever say he wanted part of the fifty thousand?"

"No, and he won't get anything from my sale of the farm, either. The farm is in my name, left me by my granddaddy." She sent the glider into motion with a nimble push of a slim foot, and a whiff of perfume drifted toward Cowan. "And, Mr. Cowan, if I thought that Armand tried to grind me up in a train wreck, and he dared come here, I'd shoot him like he was a rabid dog!"

He had a sudden dizzying picture of lovely Lucy standing, shoulders back, her beautiful bust stuck out, aiming a rifle down that overgrown lane, and an oath exploded from him. "Miss Lucy, you are my kind of woman," he yelled. "Whoopie!"

He was rewarded with a wide smile full of sunshine, and left the farm reluctantly a few minutes later wondering how soon he could decently return for another nice chat on the porch at Lonesome Farm.

Cowan carried a bowl of bar peanuts to a corner table at five thirty and had barely got seated and taken a first gulp of Irish and soda when Heiting slid into the chair opposite and signaled with his fingers to the bartender for a seven and seven.

Rather clever, Cowan thought.

"Been thinking over what you said about Armand being Alan Pawlicki," Heiting said as he wrapped one hand around his drink. "Does that mean Armand is dead?"

"Let's look at possibles. Firstly, O & M has not heard from their salesman since he left his stuff here two weeks ago, and there's been plenty of publicity given to Pawlicki's disappearance. There's no law says Armand couldn't call himself Pawlicki or Tom Thumb for that matter. We can find enemies for Armand Homulka more easily than for Pawlicki, who seems never to have existed. If Armand wanted a false name, Pawlicki might well occur to him because, you said, there was a family once lived hereabouts with that name. Now, who would want to kill Armand Homulka?"

"Don't look at me. I might want to, but I'm not the type."

"Your brother-in-law, is he the type?"

"On account of Anissa? Well, that old Howie might be, but Anissa always said there never was anything between her and Armand, just talk."

"How about Lucy Homulka, is she the type?"

"She was his victim!" Heiting raised his black eyebrows in disgust. "Unless she suddenly

decided that Armand had . . ." His voice trailed away.

"What's Anissa like, really? I met her and Howard this morning and I can see she's real friendly—" Heiting's eyes looked steadily into his "—and real pretty, like Alice in Wonderland, kind of."

"Don't let my sister's looks fool you. She handles all the business at the ranch. Howie leaves all the paperwork to her."

"You were at the scene of the train wreck, weren't you?"

"When Lucy got hurt? Me and half the male population of Tater, plus a few females. It was almost closing time at the bar on Main Street when Armand and Lucy left, heading for home. She was pretty stinko and Armand was feeling no pain, the way it looked. They were only gone maybe five minutes when *crash*—" Heiting got a wild look in his eye "—sounded like a bomb—we'd heard the train whistle, knew the two o'clock freight was due—it don't stop in Tater, just sails through. Yeah, we all ran down there, only three, four blocks away. I can still hear that conductor swearing—they hate that, you know. They always think it's suicide or God damned stupidity. That guy was so disgusted he wasn't even sorry for Lucy." Heiting drained his glass and

flashed seven fingers twice for another drink.

Early the next day Cowan was in the sheriff's office drinking Boston coffee with Piper. While Piper rocked back and forth on his leather swivel chair and studied the ceiling, Cowan expounded his theory of how Armand Homulka was Alan Pawlicki.

"I've found out a few things, Rich," Piper said. "I dunno that it interferes with your idea. Let's see if we can fit them together. I talked to Pearson over at Whitestream Bank, and Howard Runfeldt's accounts have had repeated withdrawals that Pearson can't understand. Now, I can't back any of this up, but how does it sound to you? Paul Mishka, two years ago, cosies up to Anissa Runfeldt. It's no secret that she's an easy lay. Suppose Howard, jealous as hell—he beat up one fellow pretty bad one time—suppose he catches them and puts a bullet into Mishka. Armand was always hanging around. He's a witness and sees what happened and puts the arm on Howard. He collects," Piper consulted a paper on his desk, "four thousand dollars over the next eighteen months, maybe more."

"And six months ago he gets

a job with O & M," Cowan said. "I think it stands up, Gary. He took two thousand from the hardware store when he left Tater, but to sweeten Lucy, keep her from divorcing him, he blackmailed Howard, and when he couldn't get any big money out of him, he took the job with O & M. I wracked my brains why Homulka would use a false name, and the obvious reason is that he was hiding from the railroad men. He must have been deadily afraid that he would be accused of tampering with that crossing light, which everyone thinks he did, even Lucy who loves him."

"I'll buy that. Armand probably received cashier's checks mailed to him, but the day comes when he chances coming into Whitestream as Pawlicki—probably called Heiting from a local public phone. Howie sees him, calls his room to say he has the usual payoff money, and kills his blackmailer. Armand wouldn't be afraid of Howie. They were kids together."

"Do you think Anissa knows? She and Howard seem a real congenial couple."

Piper shrugged. "They get along, I guess." His long face fell into an unaccustomed sadness. "She pushed him too far this time, Rich. Mishka was really the pits. And then his old

friend, a blackmailer. Poor Howie, a nice guy."

Cowan made a church's steeple with his hands, remembering his own lustful feelings for Anissa. "Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa," he murmured under his breath, the Latin of his boyhood for the penitent's prayer coming back easily, "My fault, my fault, my most grievous fault." He's up in the mountains now looking after the cattle," he said.

"I'll get a few men together and we'll go up tonight. We'll meet here at four thirty. It's a good coupla hours to the cabin. I'll have a horse for you."

"I want to bring Heiting if that's okay."

Piper raised an eyebrow, agreed, and Cowan shook Piper's big paw and left, a mixture of excitement and foreboding churning in his stomach.

Six men on horseback followed the track to Runfeldt's cabin in the mountains. They had searched the log house and questioned Anissa, who, professing innocence of her husband's crimes and half hysterical with fright and dread, followed the posse on a plodding mare, the slow-footed horse and the wild-eyed woman making a strange combination, but she was afraid of a more spirited

animal. The brown dog Cowan had seen the day before ran before her horse.

Cowan rode beside Heiting, who turned in the saddle from time to time to catch a glimpse of his sister far behind. His clown face was sober, and he seemed to have shrunk inside his clothes. They rode steadily upwards at a walking pace, the horses sometimes scrambling where the angle of the trail grew more acute. No one was prepared for the grisly surprise that awaited them at the turn-off to the cabin.

The brown dog found the body and barked excitedly. It lay covered with pine branches twenty yards from the trail in a cluster of evergreens. Cowan watched from the saddle as Piper carefully pulled away the green covering. He could see a smudge of black beard. "We won't touch anything," the sheriff said, and appointed one man to stay with the body while the rest pursued their way to the cabin, where a telltale feather of smoke rose from the chimney.

Cowan saw with surprise that Heiting was no longer beside him. Looking back, he saw Heiting standing next to the body, his shaggy head bent as though in prayer. Cowan's first impulse was to warn the policeman on guard not to let Heiting disturb the evidence, but as he

thought this, Heiting came slowly to join him, climbing on his horse and turning the animal's head toward the cabin, which lay in an idyllic green basin overlooking a tumbling stream. No wonder Howie liked coming here, Cowan thought, so clean and beautiful and far from his unfaithful wife. Something Sheriff Piper had said slipped into his mind. *Armand wouldn't be afraid of Howie. A nice guy.*

So he wasn't one hundred percent surprised that the man in the cabin was Armand Homulka. When the black-bearded man was led out, Cowan saw that it was the cowboy-hatted individual he had met as Howie Runfeldt the day before. Turning in his saddle, he saw Anissa sitting quietly astride the fat mare, watching from a little distance. Armand gave her only a fleeting glance as he left with his captors. She'll rat on him, Cowan thought. She'll try to save herself. For a moment he felt himself united with all men against all women. Heiting must have felt the same, for he trotted his horse after the posse without speaking to his sister.

It was accident that placed Cowan's horse next to hers on the way down. "Your husband's body—Howard Runfeldt's—is lying on the ground back there," he said. She stared at a point

between the mare's ears. "Howie must have found out about the withdrawals from the ranch accounts, the money you gave Armand to sweeten Lucy. You called Alan Pawlicki at the motel. One reason Armand took the O & M job, rather than another, was to meet you in the surrounding towns."

"When Armand got to the ranch that night," she said in her piping little girl voice, "he tried to tell Howie that it was a business loan, but even if Howie had believed it, he'd tell Lucy about it and she wouldn't believe it. She'd know about Armand and me, and all his planning would be for nothing. He never doubted that she still loved him. He was waiting for her to collect the railroad money."

She turned her Alice in Wonderland face towards him. "She wouldn't have lived long afterwards. He's crazy about me. He wanted me to go away with him after he got Lucy's money."

"So he shot Howie."

"He shot Paul Mishka, too. Lucy was in the hospital, Howie was up at the cabin. Paul stopped by the ranch early one morning, walked right into the house, and caught us together, me and Armand. He saw me first. I was naked. I can still see the surprised look on Paul's face. Oh, oh," he said, kind of

cute. Almost his last words."

"And then?"

"Don't!" he said when Armand, not dressed, came from the kitchen and lifted his gun. End of Paul."

"Two men dead. You're quite a femme fatale, Anissa."

She did not reply, but a secret smile formed itself around her small, pretty mouth as she shook the reins and urged the stolid mare to hasten down the barren track towards the ranch.

After seeing that Homulka was locked up in the Whitestream jail, Sheriff Piper led Rich Cowan into his office and poured coffee. Both men slouched in their chairs with weariness.

"When you turned it around, seeing how Runfeldt was murdered, not Armand, then you had to take another look at those withdrawals from the ranch account," Rich said. "Armand passed them on to Lucy, pretending he was working, and later took the job with O & M, so as to stay in her good graces until she would have collected from the railroad. Then he surely meant to kill her. That way he'd get the injury settlement and Lonesome Farm, too."

"Once Howie was dead, Ar-

mand didn't need the O & M job. He and Anissa had the ranch, which could be sold immediately to the state for parkland. The night he shot Howie he was wise not to go back to the motel because now there was real danger in being recognized as Armand Homulka, not just fear of railroad men giving him some kind of a subpoena. Armand didn't dare chance any link ever being found between Pawlicki and Howie's disappearance. And he had to get rid of Howie's body. That was Howie's dog that found it. He gambled on letting me see him so's I could report to you that Howie was alive after Pawlicki's disappearance. He figured I'd be gone soon."

The phone rang and the sheriff scooped it up in one big hand. He made a wry face as he lowered it into its cradle. "That was one of my guys calling. Paul Mishka's body was found buried in a remote section of the Runfeldt ranch."

"Anissa?"

"She's an accessory after the fact, both deaths."

Cowan walked out into the warm night air, climbed into the Buick, and let the car carry him down the road to Lonesome Farm.

The Unbelievable Dream of Hettie Flagg

by Maggie
Wagner-Hankins



Hettie Flagg was awake. Not very much, but enough to sense that something was a little askew. Though her eyes were not openable yet, her sniffer was already in motion. Hettie's nose, for some reason only God knew, considering all the cigarette smoke that had assaulted its tender nostrils in the last forty

of her fifty-five years, was sensitive beyond belief, sensitive to the slightest difference in the smells that usually surrounded it. And something smelled funny.

Still unable to coax her eyelids open, she put her hand to her chest, seeking to find a comfortable haven amidst the warm mountains of Jello-ish flesh.

O'm'God. My breasts. Where are my breasts! The horror of the thought made her eyelids pop open, though they took in nothing, remaining fixed on a point on the ceiling just over her head. Steady. Steady. You're just dreaming. Take it steady.

Where the hell did I get these? she wondered, exploring the smaller, firmer hillocks rising from her ribcage. These aren't my breasts! Good God, I *am* dreaming. Mine were never like this, even when they were at their prime. Maybe I don't want to wake up.

Having grown curious, she allowed her hand to travel down toward the bulwark of belly that presided over her shape when she was prone.

It, too, was gone. Her hand found only a flat, smooth plain punctuated by a dimple of a navel.

"*What the hell—*" She vaulted out of bed, intrigued but disconcerted. She'd never had a dream like this before, and she'd had some doozies.

For a moment she thought she was flying. She had jumped up quickly, accustomed to needing some momentum in order to propel the two hundred and fifty pounds of her from a lying to a standing position. The force was not needed in this case. Apparently, half the ballast had been thrown out.

She landed like Tinkerbelle on feet amazingly thin and beautiful. What made them equally remarkable was that she could see them. Without bending over.

She took a tentative step on these unfamiliar, delicate feet, above which rose two long, smooth, perfectly shaped legs.

"I like it, I like it!" she cried gleefully, preparing to enjoy this dream to the fullest.

The voice felt funny coming out of her throat. Of course—new feet, new breasts, new voice.

She tried it again. "Howdy do." It was a light, clear voice—at least from her side. She had no idea how it would sound to outsiders, any more than she could say how her own rumbly, comfortable voice greeted the ears of the folks living on Mock Street and in the surrounding shabby neighborhood in which she lived her life. But no point in even thinking about them now. Though wouldn't they

be jealous if they could see her with her new legs and her new navel and her new breasts.

Though her body was naked, there was no reason to be modest, to grab for a robe even had she known where to find one. After all, it wasn't really her body, and even if it was, it was too perfect to be shy about.

She looked around. Whoever had bestowed this dream body on her had also supplied her with a dream apartment befitting a goddess, all white and chrome and clean, bold lines, with a loose, drapy look about the corners to add warmth, and splashes of strategically placed reds and greens to keep it from looking totally like Heaven.

Gone, the raggy sofa covered with a green chenille throw. Gone, the chipped ceramic lamp. Gone, the water stain over her bed shaped like a chipmunk running with a nut in its paws.

A mirrored wall brought her darting eyes to a dead standstill. Her breath caught in her throat, where she quickly forgot about it.

"Oh my, oh my my my," her voice finally allowed. She found the power switch to her legs and walked to the mirror, never taking her eyes off the vision before her lest it should change while she blinked, as dreams had a tricky way of doing.

Pale gold hair hung loose about firm young shoulders. Large blue eyes looked back in wonder. A perfect mouth was frozen in a surprised "O." The dream body could have been that of Eve in the Garden.

Hettie went closer to the mirror, so close that her breath made a fog circle on its glass. She raised a long, slender finger, its perfectly manicured nail done in the palest rose polish, and traced a smiley face in the fog.

A phone jangled sharply behind her, causing her to spin around, eyes searching rapidly for the source of the irritating noise. She turned back to the mirror just as quickly, to make sure the body hadn't fallen prey to the whim of the subconscious mind that had formed it. It was still Eve.

And the phone be damned. It was her dream. She didn't have to answer any phones if she didn't want to.

But since, eventually, she did see it, and it hadn't stopped ringing, she thought she might give in to it just to see who called you up in a dream. She walked to it in a body that moved so gracefully it must have had years of dance lessons, picked up the ivory receiver, and said, "Yeah?"

A confused voice, male, answered back, "Katherine? Is that you?"
"No, it's Hettie Flagg," she said.

An uncomfortable laugh on the other end was followed by, "Cute. But you forgot to disguise your voice. Say, Katherine, I was wondering if you could meet me for tennis this morning. I have some free time. I know it's short notice, but I thought maybe afterward, drinks and lunch at the club—you know, some time to talk?"

Hmm. Could be interesting. And if he wanted to call her Katherine, that was his business. She never turned down drinks and lunch at the club. Not that she'd ever been to a club, except the Y.

"Sure, I'll be there. Where is it?"

"What?" The uncertainty had returned to the male voice. Then he chuckled. "The Lyon. Say, Katherine, are you feeling all right today?"

"Sure. Fine."

"Good. Well, then, I'll see you at eleven."

"Sure. By the way, who is this? How will I know you?"

"What?"

"This is my dream. I have a right to ask."

If a voice could shuffle, this man's was doing so. Finally, he managed uncomfortably, "Listen, Katherine, I don't know what you've been taking, but I'd get rid of it. And then go back to bed and sleep a while. I'll call you back later this afternoon to see if you're feeling better." He hung up.

Maybe he didn't know it was her dream.

"Well, you blew that one, dearie." She turned her attention back to the mirror, glad to note that not one hair had changed. Then she set out to explore the rest of the apartment.

A ring of the doorbell brought her once again to her senses. She was digging in the closet at the time, and grabbed a red silk dressing gown, tossing it around her shoulders. Maybe the person at the door wouldn't know it was a dream, either.

A young man dressed as a messenger stood outside the door with a long white box in his hands. He gasped on seeing her, in much the same way she had when she'd first caught sight of herself in the mirror. She couldn't blame him.

She smiled flirtatiously and said, "Hello, young man. What can I do for you today?"

The man, younger than Hettie Flagg awake but about the same age as Hettie Flagg dreaming, swallowed hard and tried to smile back. All he could manage was to hand the box over to her, not waiting for a tip, and scurry off.

The box contained a dozen long-stemmed blood red roses. She scouted around in the kitchen until she found a vase, and while she was doing so she unearthed a box of fine chocolates. Popping two of them in her mouth, she carried the box in one hand and the vase in the other into the living room.

The card read, "To Kate, the most beautiful woman in the world. Love, Harry."

She couldn't argue with the opinion. So it was to be Kate, now. Was this the same guy as on the phone? She hoped not. It would be nice to think she was in for some variety in this dream. She prayed it was still deep in the middle of the night so she'd have plenty of time. Just in case, though, she popped another chocolate into her mouth. Dream calories didn't count.

Lounging around the apartment was out of the question, no matter how the luxury of it beckoned. There was a world to be explored, the world of this Katherine/Kate whoever she was. There were people to be tennised with and flowers to be won.

She dressed quickly in the tightest pair of designer jeans she could find and a revealing red sweater. High-heeled boots and three gold chains completed the outfit. Twenty minutes later, after a wonderful orgy of making up a face that could not be enhanced, only decorated, she was off to meet the world of Katherine.

The apartment building looked faintly familiar once she got outside. Ah, yes. The Bristol Bay. Swankiest place in town. Where else would a girl like this live? She kind of wished her dream had been set someplace a little more exotic, like Paris or Rome, but beggars couldn't be choosers, and if she had to stay in town, the Bristol Bay was the place to be.

She hailed a cab, then realized she hadn't brought any money. Did you need any in a dream?

She didn't have time to find out. A car was pulling up and an extremely handsome, extremely Latin-looking man was calling her with an exotic accent and motioning her into his black Ferrari. After appraising the sparkling white smile and the promise of lust in those black eyes, she wasn't about to take a cold cab that might or might not run over her because she wasn't carrying cash.

"Kath-a-deene. You look more beautiful than ever, my dahd-ling."

"Thanks, cutie. You're not doing so bad yourself." She took the liberty of reaching across and patting his cheek.

Surprise flitted across his face, then he smiled broadly. The Ferrari tore away from the curb with a squeal.

"I got the roses," she said, testing him.

"The roses, dahd-ling?"

"You didn't send roses?" she asked.

His tan face flushed deep red. He had not sent the roses. But he soon would, she had a feeling.

"Never mind," she said, placatingly.

And then she saw it—and gasped. "Stop! Stop the car!"

Though they both nearly went through the windshield, he accomplished the task in seconds. "What is it, dahd-ling? Are you ill?"

Ignoring him, she jumped out of the car and raced across the sidewalk and into the crummy stone apartment building. It offered a familiar smell of garlic and frying fish to her sensitive nostrils. Taking the three flights of stairs with an ease she had never before experienced, she stopped abruptly at the door marked "Apt. B," the door she had opened with a key on a keychain of a poodle dog every day for the past five and a half years.

What should she do? If she'd been awake, she could have gone in. But maybe the apartment belonged to someone else in this dream.

Undecided for only a fraction of a second, she knocked, softly at first, then pounding.

The door didn't open. But the one next door did.

"Calm down, lady. She ain't there. Went out early this morning."

It was Louie. The bum, skipping work again today while his poor, pregnant wife sacked hamburgers at the Frizby Burgers down the street.

"Who went out early?" she asked.

"Hettië, the old rag. Didn't make her usual noise this morning, though. I wouldn'ta known except she tripped on the loose board in the stairs. Musta been hung over. Nobody who lives here ever steps on that board."

She hadn't either, she realized.

"But say—" Louie went on, his eyes getting that sleazy gleam in them that even Hettie found disgusting—"I just opened a bottle, if you'd like to—"

"Stuff it up your pantleg," she snarled, then turned and went down the stairs, again avoiding the loose board.

The Latino waited in the car. A relieved smile crossed his face when she came out of the building.

"What was that all about?"

"Nothing. Listen, honey, I think I'll take a rain check on the ride. I want to stroll around here for a bit, okay?"

"You can't mean it, dahd-ling. This neighborhood—"

"Listen, chum, don't knock it. It's a decent place, as long as you carry a crowbar in your purse. Now skedaddle. I'll catch you later."

There were a few people she wanted to pay calls on. As long as she had this body, she might as well use it to inflict a little pain on a few deserving souls.

As the Ferrari pulled away from the curb, she sauntered down Twelfth Street. Sensing eyes following her, she exaggerated the swing in her hips, threw her shoulders back, thrust the marvelous breasts out into the warm spring air, flipped the honey hair back over her shoulders, and strutted to McPherson's Meat Market. There was someone there who would pay for snubbing Hettie Flagg.

Lester McPherson stood behind the meat case, and against her will, she felt a chill of excitement at seeing him. Over fifty, he was still the most desirable man in the neighborhood, as far as she was concerned.

No, that's the awake Hettie. The asleep Hettie doesn't have to even look at anything over thirty or under six feet two.

"Good *morn*-ing," he said, and for a moment she took the liberty of pretending it was the awake Hettie he was speaking to. There was such delight in his eyes.

"Hello, handsome," she said. "I'm looking for some meat."

He gulped, and an embarrassed flush colored his face. "Any particular—cut?" he managed to choke out.

She came closer to the meat counter, but it was into his brown eyes that she stared. "I don't know. What do you have on special today?"

"The—the chops are nice."

"I'll have some of those, then." She suddenly slapped her forehead. "Oh, darn. I just realized. I don't have my purse with me; I haven't got any money. I guess I'll have to forget it." She turned to go, knowing she wouldn't get two feet toward the door before he—

"No, no. Not necessary." She turned inquiring eyes on him. "We have—we're a small, friendly neighborhood here, we trust each other. I extend credit to certain customers."

She would have choked if she hadn't been enjoying it so much. "Oh, I couldn't ask you. It's quite a large order I'm wanting to place, actually. I'm having a big dinner party tomorrow night. I'd

heard your meat was the best in town, so I came here, but it's clear across town from where I live. No, I couldn't ask you to extend that much credit. I'll just have to get the meat closer to home—"

"No, no, I insist," he assured her, coming around the counter and wiping his hands on a bloody apron. So many times she'd wondered what he looked like without that apron. Sure he was a few pounds overweight, but who wasn't?

He had never deigned to be so understanding of her weight problem, though, but instead had accepted her business for five years and never returned more than a thanks, have a good day. It wasn't as though she hadn't given him ample opportunity. She'd even invited him over for dinner once. He'd given her one appraising glance and then, thinking better of it, turned her down cold.

"Well, if you insist. I'll give you my address, and pay you when you deliver the meat."

She had no idea what the address was at the Bristol Bay apartment building. Not that it mattered. It wasn't his meat she was after, it was his goat. A false address and phone number would work fine.

She proceeded to order a hundred and thirty-seven dollars' worth of meat and, never having even touched him, she walked out of the shop knowing that Lester McPherson felt he'd come as close to Heaven as he was likely to come on this earth.

Two blocks later, she wandered into the Middle Day Bookstore. Gilbert Hollander was on her the minute she stepped through the door, practically slobbering all over her. Could he help her? Could he find her something? What did she like to read?

She charged eighty dollars' worth of books and made a date with him besides. Out on the sidewalk, she gave the books to a couple of kids.

By lunchtime, she was famished. The dream had lasted longer than she'd ever have hoped. It was also realistic enough that she felt the pangs of starvation as surely as if she'd been awake.

She decided to go back to the Bristol Bay and find whatever cash her subconscious had seen fit to supply her with for use during the dream. She would also change into yet another gorgeous outfit—no use wasting a terrific wardrobe like that. And then, cash in hand though she probably wouldn't need it, she would go out again in search of those beautiful young men she had only dreamed about in the past.

You are dreaming. Remember that. So make it snappy. This one'll have to last you a long time.

Back at the Bristol Bay, she went up to the apartment and, thankful that in dreams the doors don't lock, let herself back into the apartment.

What she saw took her breath away.

There stood Hettie Flagg, in the flesh. All two hundred and fifty redheaded pounds of her.

They eyed each other warily for what seemed an eternity.

There was a difference about Hettie Flagg, though. Just small things, but Hettie noticed them. The hair was combed differently—not as flamboyant as usual. There was no makeup on the saggy-cheeked face. It looked, she was surprised to see, somewhat more dignified. This Hettie Flagg had on a boring, loose fitting tunic over black slacks and flat shoes.

"Hello," the Hettie body said in a measured voice.

Hettie nodded. "You're making this dream real confusing," she finally said. "Am I supposed to feel for both bodies? Or just this one?"

The Hettie body shook its head, saying nothing.

"This could be complicated," said Hettie, faintly appalled at the body she saw standing there. How in God's name could she ever have hoped to attract a man—*any* man—with that to work with?

"Well, I don't want to wake up just yet, and I don't want you back until I do, if then," she told the body.

The Hettie face smiled. It wasn't her smile, she was happy to see. Somebody else was dreaming she was in the Hettie body, maybe. Then the Hettie voice, still rumble but quieter in tone than usual, said, "You're not going to wake up. But don't worry. It will be all right."

Hettie chose to ignore the apparition intruding into her dream. She walked around the sofa and grabbed two chocolates, putting both into her mouth, and then sat down, looking away from the blob of Hettie body.

"We have to talk," said the Hettie body, settling its bulk beside her far more gracefully than Hettie would have imagined possible.

"I don't have to talk to you or to nobody," Hettie said, eyeing the chocolate box. The Hettie body passed it to her.

"You still don't know who I am, do you?" asked the Hettie body.

"Don't know—don't want to know. Get out of my dream and leave me alone. I'll return to you soon enough."

"No, you won't. Not ever, if you don't want to." The Hettie body sat back into the sofa. It was obviously intent on staying a while.

"This whole place can belong to you if you want it," the Hettie

body said, motioning with one short, plump arm. "I really don't want it back."

"You don't want it back?" Hettie had decided not to talk to the Hettie body on the sofa, but she was intrigued.

"No, I don't," said the Hettie body. "You must have figured some of it out by now, haven't you?"

"I've figured out I'm asleep in the best dream of my life, if that's what you mean. And I didn't need you to come here and tell me it, either. It's pretty darned obvious."

"Hettie—"

"My name's Katherine in this dream, honey."

"Good. Then you're starting to get used to it. Katherine then, listen to me. You have to know this for your own welfare. You are not asleep. You're as awake as you've ever been."

"Yeah, sure, and you're president of the U. S. of A." The dream was taking an uncomfortable turn, and Hettie was getting nervous.

"I'm—I used to be—Katherine DuPont. This was my place. But I'm turning it all over to you—the name, the place, the money—"

"Money?" asked Hettie.

"Oh, heavens yes, scads of it. It's yours. But you have to want it. You have to agree to it. Or the switch won't work."

"What are you talking about? I told you, I'm dreaming."

"You're not dreaming, Hettie—Katherine. You'll find out eventually. There is a way for people to switch bodies. It happens more often than anyone would guess. But you have to know the secret. I happen to have just found it out yesterday."

Hettie sat a moment, trying to let the words of the Hettie body sink in. It was ridiculous, of course. Still, she could play along with it to a point. It was her dream.

"Oh, is that so? And what possible reason could you have, if what you say is true, for trading places with me? As you've probably noticed, that body you're wearing is not exactly a runner up for Miss America."

"Precisely. That's why I chose it."

"What? Now tell me how that makes any sense."

"It's not something I want to discuss. Just take my word for it. I don't want that body any more. I'm perfectly contented with this one. Though I must say I plan to shed a few of these pounds until I reach a more comfortable weight. But rest assured, the body, the face, all of it, are perfect to suit my needs."

"Then you're a masochist or a nut," Hettie said. As if to make

her point, she stood, pirouetted across the floor, and landed with a graceful thump back on the sofa.

"Very nice. I'm sure any man in town would be happy to share in your dance," the Hettie body said.

"I'm sure you're right," said Hettie.

"Well, do you want it?"

"Of course I want it. Who in their right mind wouldn't want it? And let me tell you, I pray to God I remember this dream when I wake up because it's a doozy. I could probably even write a magazine story and sell it from this dream."

The Hettie body shook its head. It got up to leave.

"If you really want it, then it can be final." She reached over to Hettie and, a fond look sweeping once over the Hettie face, she patted the young cheek, then turned to go. "Call Donnie," she said over her shoulder. "The number is on the chest. Tell him you took too many pills again, and you're having trouble with your memory, and ask if he could please come over and fill you in on things. You'll pick it up. Or if you don't want to bother with that, there's fifty thousand dollars in cash in the bottom dresser drawer in a cigar box. Take it and start over. I don't care what you do. Just be sure never to call yourself Hettie Flagg again. Your name is Katherine DuPont. Or whatever other name you choose to go by."

The Hettie body took a last, sweeping look around the chrome and white room, then plodded through the doorway.

Hettie stood in stunned silence for a long time.

Twelve hours later, still in the confines of the room, she waited for the moment when she would open her eyes on another day in the tiny, dingy apartment on Twelfth Street. The dream was bursting at the seams to be over.

But it didn't happen.

Finally, beginning to wonder if it had been *she* who had taken the pills, she lay down and went to sleep, not really wanting to bid a fond farewell to this crazy, wonderful world she had found herself in, but too tired to keep her eyes open another minute.

"Hey, Hettie! Whatcha got!" The thin, stringy-haired child ran to the plump woman, knowing she would probably be rebuffed. But she was sure that sooner or later Hettie Flagg would warm up to her. The child had made it her personal project to teach Hettie that kids were worth the time of day once in a while.

She wiped her nose across her sleeve and ran to the woman. But

instead of the usual, "Not now, Betty. I'm busy," the large woman fixed her with eyes uncharacteristically kind.

"Hi there," she said to the girl. "I'm just getting ready to take these boxes of food over to the shelter. Want to help?"

Betty looked down and for the first time noticed that the two boxes sitting outside the battered apartment building were filled with canned and boxed goods.

"To the shelter?" she asked, not really believing her ears. "Sure, I'll help." She wondered briefly about Hettie's toned-down appearance, but she was too busy struggling under the weight of the box the woman had just placed in her arms to dwell on it much. She was vaguely aware of noting that Hettie looked thinner without skin tight stretch pants and high heels, and a little younger without makeup on.

"After this," the large woman puffed, "why don't we go to Stanley's for lunch. I'll buy you a hamburger and you can tell me why you aren't in school."

Betty looked up sharply. But there was no threat in the words. Hettie's eyes had changed, too.

They passed a shop with two mannequins in the window modeling the latest in sportswear. "Someday I'll look like that," Betty said, pausing just a moment to stare at one of the mannequins. It had long blonde hair, blue eyes, and perfect features.

"Now why would you want to do that?" the woman asked her. Betty couldn't believe anyone would ask such a stupid question.

"Why?" she asked. "Because—well, everyone wants to be beautiful."

Then, fearing her words might have insulted the woman who obviously had never been beautiful and never would be, she shifted uncomfortably.

"Oh, I don't know," the woman told her; "beauty has its place, I suppose, but there's a lot of work to be done out here in this world. And I can't help but think that being too beautiful might get in the way of it once in a while."

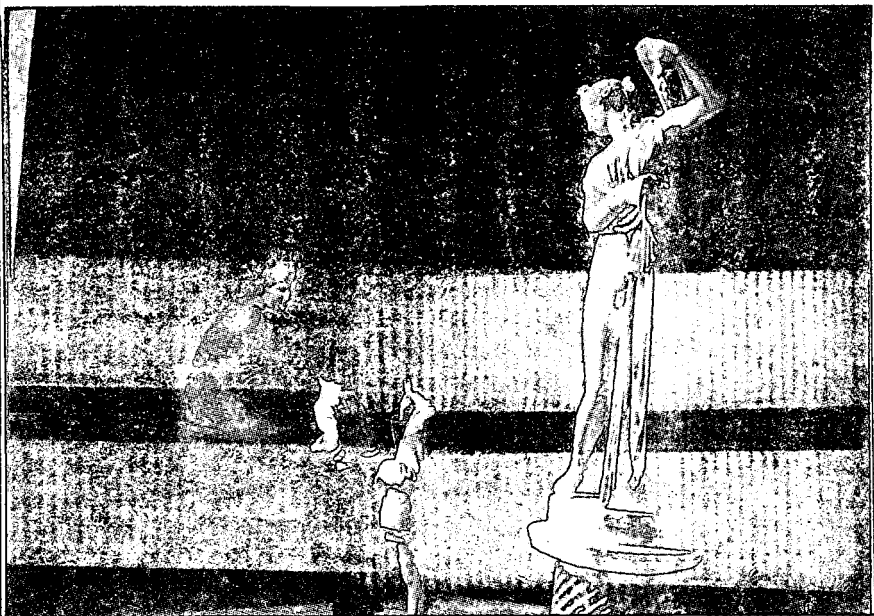
Betty thought it over. She finally decided it was good that Hettie could look at it that way. Maybe it helped her to forget that she was so ugly.

She glanced sidewise at the heavy woman puffing slightly under the weight of the larger box, and watched her. No. She couldn't really say Hettie was ugly. She wasn't beautiful.

But there was something about her.

It just didn't look like the same old Hettie.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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"As it happens, I know a *lot* of secrets. . . ." We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

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Merely Players



What had wakened him? He lay in the dark, listening to the scree of crickets out in the cool canyon night. Their chirping had a slow, sleepy rhythm. He turned over and saw the curtains move in the breeze that came up the canyon from the ocean, bringing the smell of

sage and eucalyptus. Fifty yards off in the stables a horse nickered softly and set down a heavy hoof in its box stall. Horses were his business. He kept his own for strangers to ride, and he boarded horses for owners with no place to keep them. He listened carefully in case there was trouble. It didn't sound

that way. He grunted, turned over, started to drift off again when he heard footfalls, soft ones on the white gravel beyond the long plank porch that fronted this bat-and-board ranch house.

He got out of bed, went to the window, pushed the curtain aside, peered out. Outdoor lighting shone on the stables at night, and some of its reflection reached here, and he thought he saw a big man standing out there staring at the house. He thought he knew the man. He pulled a cambric shirt off the ladderback of a chair, flapped into it, kicked into worn jeans. His watch lay on the chair seat. He strapped this on, and legged out the window onto the porch. "Something I can do for you?" He read the watch. Early. Nine twenty. "Mitch Russell, isn't it? From the Coach and Four?"

"Can I talk to you?" Russell took a step closer. "I know it's late. I'm sorry. But I can't think of anyplace else." He smelled of whisky. "I need help."

Bohannon sighed to himself. It was often this way. He wished it wasn't. He loved horses and the life he lived here. Human beings he wasn't that keen about. But he'd been a decent sheriff's deputy for fourteen years, and though he'd retired, people wouldn't forget it. He became a last refuge. So he took out a private investigator's li-

cense. There seemed no way around it.

"Come on," he said, and moved along the porch, the boards dry, cold, gritty under his bare soles. He pulled open the aluminum screen door to the kitchen, unlocked the wooden door, pushed it open, switched on a low-key lamp in the middle of the big deal table in the center of the pine plank room. Around it cupboards loomed, a giant cookstove, a big old icebox. Russell followed him into the place and stood. Bohannon lit a burner on the stove, filled a tall blue enamel coffee pot with water at the sink, set it on the burner to heat, got down coffee from a cupboard. "Sit down," he said. "We'll have coffee in a few minutes." He went to the table and pulled out a chair for himself and lit a cigarette. "What's happened?"

"Eugenia's dead," Russell said. "My wife. Somebody shot her." Behind his ruddy beard and mustache and the blue granny glasses he always wore, Mitch Russell was a handsome man, and in the quiet lamplight here at the table he looked younger than Bohannon had gauged him to be. "When I got home at six twenty, she was lying on the floor." His voice wobbled for a second. He swallowed hard. "In the living room. By the fireplace. We've got a Navajo rug there. It

got blood on it. She'd hate that."

"Robbery?" Bohannon asked.

"Nothing's stolen." Russell shook his head. "Somebody just shot her." He wore a white shirt and black string tie, black trousers, polished black shoes. He was a publican. The Coach and Four was supposed to be nineteenth century English. All glossy oak and brass and pewter, it was one of many fancy shops that had opened in Madrone in late years, to catch the tourists taking Highway 1 up the coast to Monterey and Big Sur—eateries, antique shops, gifts, fancy groceries. Overpriced, all of them. A beer and sandwich in the Coach and Four cost ten bucks. Bohannon never ate or drank there except on business. Mitch Russell and his handsome blonde goddess wife Eugenia fit right in. "Shot her and ran away. Why?"

"Intended burglary," Bohannon said, "and she surprised him. You didn't call the sheriff, right? Instead, you drank for a while and tried to sort it out, and thought of me."

"The sheriff would lock me up," Russell said.

"Why," Bohannon said. "Did you kill her?"

"No. But I'm not Mitch Russell. I'm Avery Ames." He waited a moment for a sign that Bohannon knew the name. Bohannon didn't. "I was an actor. Daytime soaps. I wasn't fa-

mous, and the pay wasn't much. But I married a rich woman. This was six years ago, seven. She owned a big power boat. We used it a lot. Then, one weekend she dropped overboard when I was below. She drowned. Her body washed up on the beach at Malibu a few days later. They said I killed her for her money. I served five years for manslaughter. When I got out, Eugenia was waiting for me. We married, I put on weight, grew a beard, we moved up here."

"And lived quietly under a false name," Bohannon said.

"And now somebody's murdered Eugenia," Russell said. "And you know how that's going to go. I'll be back in San Quentin again. I can't cut it, Bohannon. This time they'll kill me. They're not human beings in there."

"So what do you think I can do?" Bohannon said.

"Find out who killed her," Russell said. "I'll pay you well." His face flushed in the lamp-light. He was talking about his wife's money. Everyone knew Eugenia Russell was rich and some said she kept the handsome Mitch as her fancy boy. She was older than he, that was certain. "Could I have a drink?" He looked around at the looming shadows.

"I'll get the coffee," Bohannon said. "You need a clear head. So do I." He went to the

stove. When he came back to the table, and set a thick mug in front of Russell and another at his own place, Russell was smoking and looked sulky. "While I'm finding the one who killed her," Bohannon asked, and sat down, "what will you be doing?"

"Hiding out," Russell said. "What else can I do? I'll be the first one the police will suspect. The only one."

"Sheriff," Bohannon corrected him, and lit a cigarette for himself. "It won't do. You're innocent. Go direct to the sheriff and tell him all about it, including who you are. You're not in any trouble. Don't put yourself there."

Russell grunted and tried the hot coffee.

Bohannon said, "Who do you think killed her?"

"Shot her with my gun," Russell said. "I can't find it. He took it with him."

"Why would anyone want to kill her?"

"That's another thing," Russell said, and turned ash off the cigarette by rubbing it in the big old square glass ashtray on the table. "I'm the only one with any reason." He looked up sharply. The blue glasses glinted. "I mean, that's how law enforcement would see it. We'd been having arguments lately. Sometimes in the pub, where people heard. But no—I don't

know anybody else she didn't get along with. You knew her. She was good-natured as hell. Everybody liked her. It sounds funny to call her a good joe. She had too much class for that. But that's what she was, right?"

"A charmer," Bohannon nodded. "She'll be missed."

"Tell me about it," Russell said bleakly. "Christ, what a mess. Sometimes it's hard not to be superstitious. When a thing like this happens to you twice?"

"Arguments about what?" Bohannon drank coffee and watched the copper-bearded man.

"About the theater. She wanted me to close it."

It was in a long room behind the pub. Russell had only opened it last year. A community playhouse. A lot of retired people with time on their hands lived in and around Madrone. Acting in plays was a way to use time, to liven up too many sunny, empty days, too many snug evenings by crackling fires, dreams come true that weren't as sweet in actuality as they had seemed when you had to go to a job every day. Those who didn't act in the plays or help out painting sets or sewing costumes went to watch their neighbors perform. Bohannon had gone once. With T. Hodges, a young female sheriff's officer he'd taken a shine to. He hadn't gone again.

He had no tolerance for amateurs. What was the point in doing things badly? Better not to do them at all.

"You started it because you missed acting," he said.

"She didn't know how much of me it was going to use up." Russell put out his cigarette, drank more coffee. "She wanted more for herself." He grimaced. "I kept promising — but we had less and less time together. So she said I had to close it up." His laugh was short and humorless. "She had the right. It was her money, wasn't it?"

Bohannon pushed back his chair and rose.

"Where you going?" Russell scowled.

"We're both going." Bohannon went and turned off the burner under the coffee pot. "Down to the sheriff's. I have a friend there. I'll put in a word for you. You'll be okay."

"I don't think so." Russell sat where he was.

"How can I find who killed your wife?" Bohannon said. "You don't give me any leads. The sheriff's men can do it."

"I'll sit in a cell," Russell said. "You'll see."

"You're overreacting." Bohannon moved to the door. His sweaty old Stetson hung from a brass hook there. He took the hat down and put it on. Boots stood on the floor. He sat on a straight, flower-painted Mexi-

can chair with a straw seat, and pulled the boots on. They smelled of the stables. "Come on. Let's get it over with. You can stop being afraid then. That will feel good."

Russell got wearily to his feet. "She'll still be dead."

"That's another thing." Bohannon pulled open the door. "You can't leave her lying there. It's been too long already."

Russell looked at him glumly. "Damn," he said. "Damn."

“What the hell happened to you?”

Gerard stared at him from the far side of a desk strewn with papers, file folders, photographs. The night shift was usually quiet in the sheriff's substation. But it still smelled as it had always smelled, and Bohannon hated the smell, hated the way the light fell in the halls, the offices. Two bad things had happened to him at the end of his time as a peace officer here. He couldn't forget them or forgive them. One had ended in the whitewash of an officer he knew had shot dead an unarmed Latino boy at a teenage dustup on a Saturday night in Cayucos. The other, involving heroin smugglers on a grimy, stinking fishing boat up from Mexico, had ended in the kidnap, beating, gang rape of Lisa, his wife.

Her body had recovered, but not her mind. She was in a mental hospital—it looked like forever. Bohannon had left the department then. He never enjoyed coming back here, but sometimes there was no way around it. This was one of those times.

"I look worse than I feel," he said. His shirt was ripped, one sleeve almost off. His jeans were torn at the knee. He'd lost his hat. There figured to be dry grass in his hair. He had bled from scrapes and scratches. "I was bringing Mitch Russell down here to talk to you. He didn't want to come. I misjudged how badly he didn't want to come." Bohannon lowered himself, wincing, onto a straight chair. He was bruised all over. "A mile above town, he asked me to stop so he could get out and tend to nature. Made a ruckus out in the brush, called me to help him, like a fool I went. And he hit me from behind, threw me down a gully, went off with the truck."

"He's a big guy," Gerard said, "but I never took him for violent. Kind of artsy-craftsy, wouldn't you say?"

"Not any more," Bohannon said. "His wife is dead, murdered. He found the body. He came to me instead of calling you because he thought you'd lock him up for killing her."

"Why would I do that?" Gerard said. "Did he kill her?"

"I don't think so." Then Bohannon explained the why of it. Gerard's eyebrows went up and stayed up until Bohannon finished the explanation. Then Gerard picked up the telephone. Bohannon went to the washroom and cleaned himself up. When he came back, Gerard was on his feet, heading out the door to the parking lot, under its tall, rustling eucalyptus trees. "I put out an APB. I'm on my way to the Russell place. You well enough to come along?"

"No," Bohannon said, "but I'm coming anyway."

The patrol car swung with a squeal of worn tires off the highway and followed jittering headlight beams along the crooked trails among the tall pines in the hills of Settlers Cove. Gerard said, "I remember the Avery Ames case. He would have got off, but before she drowned he'd taken to signing her name to checks without asking her first."

Bohannon grunted. He glimpsed through the windshield a crossroads sign as the headlights touched it. "This is the road. Cholmondeley." He pronounced it Chumley. Gerard spun the steering wheel and glanced at him. "Is that how you say it? Jesus, I've been wrestling with all those syllables for years. Chumley? No kidding?"

The road climbed steeply. The worn gears of the county car labored. When the road leveled off, they saw ahead the winking, turning, amber light on the top of an ambulance. A new Cherokee wagon stood beside it. So did another county car whose headlights shone into ferns, poison oak, tree trunks. Gerard let his car lurch half into the roadside ditch, killed the engine, and got out. Bohannon got out painfully on the ditch side. A young uniformed officer came toward them.

"She in there?" Gerard said.

"Way you reported it—dead," the young officer said.

"That you, Belle?" Gerard called, and a woman in a Levi outfit waved an arm. For a second the ambulance light touched her white hair. Gerard, the young officer, and Bohannon walked to where she stood at the foot of redwood stairs that climbed high to a house where all the windows glared yellow through the pines. Belle Hesseltine said, "You brought Hack, too." She eyed Bohannon. "Had to beat him up first, did you?"

"He arrived at my office like that," Gerard said.

"Mitch Russell did it to me," Bohannon told her.

"Looks like his day for misbehaving," the old doctor said. "Shot his wife in the throat. Killed her instantly. The bullet's not in the body. Went

through and hit the fireplace, I'd judge. I didn't find it, but it should be there. You'll locate it, I expect. Small caliber."

"Big enough to kill her," Bohannon said.

"You finished with the body?" Gerard said.

"Something wrong?" she said.

"You were supposed to wait till I said go."

"Waste of time," she said. "I live just around the bend. Lieutenant, I'm only filling in for the medical examiner. I don't know the rules. But I didn't disturb anything. She's just the way I found her. What got into Mitch? Sweet man, I always thought, spineless but sweet."

"I don't think he did it," Bohannon said.

"And that's why he beat you up?" Belle Hesseltine said. "All right. Not my problem." She picked up her kit and turned away. "I'm going home, unplug my telephone, and get a night's sleep, for a change." She walked toward her shiny Cherokee, straight and brisk as a young girl.

"What was the time of death?" Gerard called.

"I'll know better tomorrow, when I check the stomach contents." She lifted her kit through a window into the car. "But by the body temperature, it was someplace between three this afternoon—" she walked out of sight behind the tall car that

was a box of darkness where it stood "—and sundown." A door opened, springs squeaked, the door slammed, and the lights of the Cherokee glared on the ambulance. She started the engine, let go the handbrake. "Goodnight," she called, and drove off into the night.

"No way to face her down," Gerard said. "Even when she's wrong, she's right. I can't wait to get old."

On the deck at the top of the steps, lighted from the rear by the glare from the house, a red-haired fat boy in green tunic and waist-tied green pants, and a hollow-cheeked brown boy in the same kind of outfit, were smoking cigarettes. They had unfolded a gurney just inside the sliding glass door panel of the house. A folded green blanket lay on the gurney. The red-haired fat boy said:

"When can we take the body, lieutenant?"

"You got a lot of calls on your time tonight?" Gerard asked. "Bodies littering the landscape, are they?"

"No, sir," the fat boy said. "Nothing like that."

"I didn't think so," Gerard said and led Bohannon into the Russell living room, stepping around the gurney. The young deputy followed them. Eugenia Russell lay as her husband had said, on a Navajo rug in front of a handsome fireplace. She

did not, as is often said in books, appear to be asleep. Her eyes were open, and the way her mouth hung open gave her a look of surprise. She wasn't surprised. Not any more. She was dressed in beige cotton trousers and jacket, expensive, cut large and blowsy the way young women dressed these days, though Eugenia hadn't been exactly young. Her shirt had broad pink stripes, to match her high-heeled sandals. One sandal had a broken heel, not quite detached.

"See that?" Gerard had crouched beside her. "She must have stepped backward too fast. When she saw the gun."

"I guess so." Bohannon bent and picked the bullet out of the ashes in the firebasket. A clean chip out of the sooty stones lining the fireplace showed where the bullet had struck and bounced off. It was a bunged-up lump of lead—.32 caliber, he thought. Gerard was busy with Eugenia Russell's pockets. Bohannon looked at the young deputy. He said, "No luck finding the gun?"

"It's not in the house." The boy's mind seemed elsewhere. He kept checking his watch. "Should I get my flashlight and look around outdoors? By the deck, by the stairs?"

"Go ahead," Gerard said, without looking up. "Only be careful of the poison oak."

The boy grinned feebly and went out. His heels were loud on the wooden steps going down to the road. Gerard turned and laid bracelets, a jeweled cigarette lighter, and a pack of Players on the coffee table, along with a jeweled watch and an ostrich hide wallet dyed blue. He grunted, getting to his feet. "Not robbery," he said. "All this stuff is real—no costume jewelry here." He picked up the wallet, opened it, drew out money. "Fifty dollar bills, twenty dollar bills." He pushed the money back and let a strip of plastic unfold from the wallet, each pocket with a credit card in it. Gerard wagged his head, folded up the strip, glanced at Bohannon. "There was a housebreaker reported in this area today, but he sure as hell didn't stop here."

"Maybe he heard somebody coming before he could get to robbing," Bohannon said. "Mitch getting home from work." He went to look at the rest of the house and came back. Gerard sat at the coffee table, making a list on a sheet of paper with a ballpoint pen. Bohannon said, "He could have run out the back, climbed up through the trees. It's steep, but if a man was scared enough, he could do it."

"We'll look in daylight." Gerard clipped the pen into a shirt pocket, folded the paper, pushed

it away. "But I don't think we'll find tracks. Mitch killed her, Hack."

"Ex-cons can't own guns," Bohannon said.

"Must have been Eugenia's." Gerard watched the ambulance crew lay Eugenia on the gurney, cover her with the green blanket, wheel her to the door. The young deputy waited on the deck for them to rattle the wheels over the doorsill, then edged past them and came into the room, holding out a revolver half wrapped in a handkerchief. Gerard smiled and took it carefully. "We'll check the serial number. Thank you, Vern. Good work."

"Mitch didn't take her to sea and drop her overboard," Bohannon said. "He came to me. I don't see that as the act of a guilty man."

"It's how I see flight to avoid prosecution," Gerard said.

"Despair," Bohannon said. He looked around. Fingerprint powder dusted every well-kept surface. He'd seen it in the other rooms, too. He asked Vern, "You do the fingerprint work? Take the photos?"

The lad nodded. "It's all in my car." He read his watch again, and asked Gerard, "We through here now, then?"

Below, the ambulance doors slammed, loud in the night.

"You in a hurry?" Gerard pushed jewelry and wallet into

his pockets. "Go see all the windows and doors are secured, will you? Then you can stand watch outside. Let no one in."

The boy, on his way out of the room, turned back, agony in his face. "My wife's having a baby tonight." He glanced yet again at his watch. "How long do I have to stay?"

"Till the A.M. watch. Everybody's on vacation."

"Well, can I at least sit in the car? T. Hodges said she'd radio me as soon as Tina calls the station."

"You can sit in the car," Gerard said.

Looking miserable, Vern left the room. Bohannon said, "Let him go to the hospital. I'll stand guard here. It's Mitch you expect to show up, isn't it?"

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Gerard said. "You could have your pickup back."

"And you could have your fall guy," Bohannon said. "He won't show up, but maybe somebody will. I haven't anything else to do. I'll stay."

"I'm too short-handed to refuse." Gerard wrapped the revolver carefully, stowed it in a jacket pocket. "Thanks."

Below, the ambulance ground its gears and drove off.

"Here's the bullet," Bohannon said and laid it in Gerard's hand. "Found it in the fireplace, like Belle said. Almost forgot to give it to you."

The noisy county cars, one with Vern in it, headed for the hospital, the other carrying Gerard back to his desk full of work, drove off and quiet settled in. The sea wind whispered in the tall pines. An owl repeated its deep hoot from a high branch. Bohannon walked through the house. In the kitchen, a bottle of Old Grand-Dad was on the table with a glass that held an inch of melted ice. Cigarette butts filled an ashtray. Bohannon switched off the lights. He did the same in all the other rooms, then leaned in the open doorway to the front deck, and dug cigarettes from his shirt pocket. The pack was mashed but the contents intact. He lit a cigarette, blew smoke into the darkness, listened, waited. When it was smoked down, he carried it through the darkness to the bathroom, dropped it into the toilet. He flushed the toilet, found aspirin in the medicine chest, washed the tablets down with water from a clear plastic tooth glass. He hoped the aspirin would ease his aches. He switched off the bathroom light, went through the house again to the front deck, and sat on a hard bench there among potted plants. It wouldn't do to get too comfortable. He might fall asleep.

He did fall asleep. Again he wasn't sure what woke him.

But he was alert right away. He got up slowly from the bench, remembered his boots, sat down, and pulled them off. He moved to the stairs and strained to hear. The owl had got his meal and gone silent. But frogs clamored from a faraway pond. The wind still sighed in the trees. He raised his watch close to his eyes, but he couldn't read it. Then a twig snapped on the steps below. His heart thumped. He leaned over the deck rail and squinted down into the dark. He heard labored breathing, a name whispered under the breath. "Genie, Genie." Bohannon backed away from the stairs. A head in a pale hat appeared, a figure in pale clothes, pale shoes that moved without sound.

"Police officer," Bohannon said. "Hold it right there."

And a gun went off. Maybe the pale figure gave a startled cry first. But it only registered with Bohannon later. The gun registered at once. He saw a little burst of fire from the gun and heard the report and felt the wind from the bullet as it passed him, and heard the bullet thump into the wooden wall of the house behind him—all these things at one time. Bohannon hit the deck and rolled. He knocked the shooter's legs from under him. The man went down and the gun went skittering off across the planks of the

deck. He didn't see it. He heard it. He pinned the man, face down, to the deck, and bent his arms up behind him. The arms were short, thin, and there was no strength to them. Bohannon sat on the man.

"Who the hell are you, and what do you want here?"

"Ouch," the man said, "you're hurting me."

"You tried to shoot me," Bohannon said.

"You startled me," the man said. "I was frightened."

"On your feet." Bohannon lifted him up. There was nothing to that. He was boy-sized. He kept the arms bent up behind the man and pushed him through the open doorway into the house. He worked the light switch. The man was moon-faced, around forty-five, in a red and blue Hawaiian shirt and green and yellow plaid Bermuda shorts. His straw hat had a dazzling broad ribbon around it. A tourist. All that was missing were the dark glasses and the camera on a strap. Bohannon slowly let him go. "Take it easy, now. Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I'm a friend of Eugenia Carter," he said, rubbing his arms. "We were in college together."

Bohannon backed out onto the deck, watching the little man taking only seconds to glance around for the gun. It

lay by a redwood planter tub in a corner. He picked it up. "You always bring firearms to call on old friends?"

"I was afraid. It's so dark here. I'm not used to wilderness. Aren't there wild animals?"

"None as wild as you," Bohannon said. "Was she expecting you? Did you phone ahead?"

"No. I wanted to surprise her." The little man took off his hat. He was bald. He wiped his pale dome with a handkerchief and looked around. "Where is she? You're not—" he eyed Bohannon puzzledly "—her husband, are you?"

"She's dead. And no, I'm not." The gun was a new .32 revolver. He opened the cylinder. Two bullets were missing. He snapped the cylinder back. "Someone shot her this afternoon." He looked hard into the dazed eyes. "Was it you?"

"Shot her? Dead?" He shook his head violently. "No, oh, no. It wasn't me. No way. This is the first time I was ever here. Right now. Tonight. Oh, God."

"Then you must have shot a wild animal before, right? What was it? A field mouse?"

"I never shot anything, I swear it. The gun was never full. You're supposed to keep a chamber empty. They told me that when I bought it. It's a safety precaution."

Bohannon sighed. "Show me

some identification, please."

He went to the phone with it and dialed Gerard. "It wasn't Mitch," he said. "It was one Denver Parks from West Los Angeles. You want to come and fetch him proper? Or shall I run him over to you in his car?"

Someone long on dreams and short on common sense had put up a modern building of varnished planks, tinted glass, heavy beams, on a point of land in Madrone at the juncture of two dusty roads. It was a site nobody had been able to make anything of before. The building was all sharp angles and prowls. The builder meant to keep a cafe downstairs, rent out the rest of the rooms there for shops, and live in the rooms above. But there was no place but the roads to park on and that meant a climb to reach the place, and the building had stood empty most of the time since. It was good to look at, but not much use. Lately a young couple had opened the cafe again, but no one else was in it when Bohannon sat by a tall triangular window for lunch with T. Hodges. They were the only customers. They ate chicken wrapped in crepes and covered with a cream sauce, and drank a white wine from a vineyard the other side of the mountains.

"He's just out of a psychiatric hospital," T. Hodges said. "Nervous breakdown following a divorce. He's still shaky, but he's on his way to San Francisco to start life over."

"He should have stayed in his car with his foot on the gas," Bohannon said. "He shouldn't have stopped in Madrone."

"He was taking it easy. Taking in the sights." T. Hodges was dark and trim, with thick eyebrows above lustrous brown eyes that often did her smiling for her—she was self-conscious about her teeth. The upper ones protruded a little. "It's true, he and Eugenia were in the same class at UCLA—twenty some years ago. He says he dated her then."

"Did she carry him in her bookbag?" Bohannon asked.

"That we can't check, can we?" T. Hodges lifted a slim green bottle and poured wine into both glasses. It was a nice brisk wine. The crepes were not so good. Bohannon doubted the cooking here was going to draw crowds. "He was madly in love with her, but after graduation she married a wealthy attorney old enough to be her father. He died only a few years later—but by that time little Denver Parks was married himself. Still, he never forgot the gorgeous, golden-haired Eugenia. And after he got over the shock of his wife's leaving him, he

dreamed of finding Eugenia and proposing marriage. Only he didn't really try. It was a fantasy."

"Until he happened to stop for a couple of beers at the Coach and Four yesterday, and there was her picture on the wall, smiling, big as life."

T. Hodges nodded, chewed, swallowed the last of her lunch. "He knew her instantly. He got very excited."

"Mitch would have been on the bar." Bohannon used his napkin, laid it down. "Did he ask Mitch if it was Eugenia?"

"No. Mitch is in that photo, too, remember? He got all shy, afraid maybe Mitch and Eugenia were married."

"So how did he get Eugenia's address?"

"Barbara Duskin came in at six and Mitch left, and Parks asked Barbara." T. Hodges smiled cautiously, keeping her upper lip over her teeth. "I'll bet you're surprised Barbara Duskin knows her own address, aren't you?"

"I'm not surprised she'd give Eugenia's to a stranger."

A spindly girl of maybe twelve, with straw-colored hair and a fiery flush to her cheeks, came to the table to take away the plates. She looked scared of them both, but she swallowed hard, took a deep breath, and said, "Dessert today is apple pan dowdy with clotted cream,

or caramel flan, or chocolate mousse torte."

"Coffee, please," Bohannon said, and looked at T. Hodges. "Shall we split an apple pan dowdy between us?" The deputy nodded her sleek, dark head, and Bohannon told the girl child, "One apple pan dowdy, please, and two plates."

"All right," the girl said doubtfully, and went away across the tall, desperately empty room. She didn't balance the plates well but though they teetered and clanked, they didn't fall. She vanished. In a far, echoing room, they heard her high, thin voice: "They only want one dessert and they're both going to eat it. Is that all right?"

They laughed. Bohannon said, "Mitch left at ten after six. When had Eugenia left, then?"

"No one seems to know. But Parks got there around five, and he says Mitch was alone. And not always present. Parks ran out of cigarettes, needed change for the machine, and had to wait twenty minutes for Mitch to come back to the bar. Mitch said he'd been in the kitchen, making canapes, but Gerard sent somebody to look and there were no canapes. Did Mitch slip out, drive home, and kill Eugenia?" T. Hodges asked. "And then come back?"

"What for?" Bohannon said.

The spindly youngster came with cups of coffee, frowning,

biting her tongue at the corner of her mouth, concentrating on not sloshing coffee into the saucers. She went away.

Bohannon said, "Mitch had time to kill her later, if he wanted to kill her. Parks is lying, isn't he? He killed her, and he's trying to stick Mitch with it."

"When?" she said. "He was in the pub till seven."

"That what Barbara Duskin says?" Bohannon asked

T. Hodges nodded. "She's terribly upset. Desolated."

"Yup. Who'll give her a job now?" Bohannon drank coffee. "Any other witnesses? Customers?"

"No locals. Only tourists. No way to find them." With quiet, amused eyes, T. Hodges watched the girl solemnly set down a big serving of apple pan dowdy by the vase of marigolds in the center of the table. The dessert steamed under its lathering of cream, and smelled of cinnamon and brown sugar. The girl laid plates in front of them. "Okay?" she said, and when Bohannon reminded her of forks, "Oh, damn." She flounced away in her skinny-ass jeans, running shoes, Madonna T-shirt. T. Hodges said, "You mean he came to Madrone knowing where to find Eugenia and went there before he reached the pub?"

"It's possible."

The girl came and handed them each a fork. The flush was bright in her thin cheeks. "Now—okay?" she asked.

"Okay." Bohannon smiled. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*," she snapped, and this time she ran away.

Bohannon laughed. "Service with a smile."

"Child labor," T. Hodges said grimly. "What are her mom and dad doing back there? Why isn't the child at the beach?"

"You going to issue a citation, officer?" Bohannon asked.

"I'm going to—" she picked up the plate of dessert "—eat my apple pan dowdy." With her fork, she pushed half of it onto Bohannon's plate, the other half onto her own. "Doesn't it smell heavenly?"

"He's still crazy." Bohannon pitched into the concoction, talked with his mouth full. "Why come creeping back in the middle of the night? He'd set Mitch up for the killing. So his reason couldn't have been to steal stuff to make the motive look like robbery. What does he say?"

"That the middle of the night was his only visit." T. Hodges swallowed, drank some coffee. "That he'd been so surprised at finding the girl of his dreams alive and well totally by accident, in a place he'd never been to, never expected to visit, that he was stunned. He drove around and thought about going

to see her. But he couldn't work up his nerve. Not till you saw him. It took him hours."

"How does he explain the gun?"

"Just that he bought it when he knew he was going to travel. He'd never traveled anywhere in his life before. A little tax accountant, working out of his house. Crime was everywhere out there." T. Hodges cringed and rolled her eyes, pantomiming silent-movie fear. "Muggers, drug-crazed killers."

"And wild animals—" Bohannon nodded "—in the dark woods." He worked on finishing the apple pan dowdy. "Nobody saw him driving around all those hours, trying to work up his nerve to call on Betty Coed?"

T. Hodges peered at him and laughed. "Betty Who? What are you talking about?"

"It's an old song," Bohannon said. "You're too young to know about it. Come to think of it, so am I. My mother used to sing it while she did the dishes." He drank some coffee, wiped his mouth, sighed contentment at how good the dessert was, and laid down his napkin. "He give any hint as to why he might have wanted to kill her?"

"He did a little monologue about how she brushed him off with a laugh in college after a few dates," T. Hodges said. "That's not a rational motive. Not after twenty-odd years."

"Maybe she brushed him off

with a laugh yesterday." Bohannon pushed back his chair, reached for his wallet. "And who said he was rational? Why didn't that bring back the old hurt again? Obviously he's never forgotten it. Why didn't it drive him over the edge?"

"You ready to go?" she said.

"Yup." Bohannon laid money on the table and rose. "Place might make it, if folks hear about the apple pan dowdy."

"We'll spread the word." She took a last quick gulp of coffee, laid her napkin down, and stood. "Maybe then they can afford to hire a waitress."

Bohannon opened the door for her. A breeze came in. She passed outside beneath his arm. He called back into the handsome, vacant rooms, "Thank you, and good luck," and followed her out onto a varnished deck in bright sunshine. The door fell shut behind them, and they started down the long stairs together, breeze ruffling her hair.

"You're still sure it wasn't Mitch?" she said. "With his record?"

"That's why I'm sure it wasn't Mitch," Bohannon said. "Unless he's crazy, too. And I don't think he is."

He was using the stake truck from the stables until he got his pickup back, if he ever did. The

cab of the stake truck smelled of timothy hay, the seat was mended with tape that was peeling off, the floor was tracked with dried manure, and the ride was rough, but T. Hodges didn't seem to mind. They walked together from the parking lot into the substation, where she took the place of an older woman officer at the reception desk, and fastened on a headset. Bohannon went down the hall to Gerard's office.

Gerard wasn't there but the file folder with the record of Avery Ames, alias Mitch Russell, lay on his desk. Bohannon sat down and read it. When Gerard came in, Bohannon gave him back his chair and asked, "What about the bullet?"

Gerard held out a steaming mug of coffee. "You want?" Bohannon shook his head; Gerard tried the coffee, set the mug down, and said, "It's from the Russell gun—bought by Eugenia in Beverly Hills about the time she married Mitch. Ironical, right?"

"That bullet was smashed," Bohannon said.

"The San Francisco police have lab equipment you and I couldn't pay for with our combined lifetime earnings," Gerard said. "They made the match. I believe them."

"What about fingerprints?" Bohannon said.

"Wiped clean," Gerard said.

"So anybody could have used it. Mitch didn't go around with it strapped to his thigh. It was in the house, right?"

"Rules out Parks," Gerard said. "He had his own."

"Maybe," Bohannon said. "Did Belle do the autopsy yet?"

"I stopped by the hospital on my lunch break," Gerard said. "She says death occurred close to five o'clock. There are bruises on her arms. Somebody grabbed them hard."

Bohannon grunted, frowned, sat down. "The time bothers me. The Coach and Four is busy between five and seven. Pass there, you'll hear laughs and clinking ice cubes. Eugenia plays—played—the piano. Golden oldies. Strange time for her to go home. Unless she had an appointment."

"You mean Parks phoned her and set it up?"

"So as not to encounter Mitch. Why not? Parks is crazy. She's his dreamgirl. Mitch was at the pub till after six. There was no housebreaker, was there? You didn't find tracks going up the hill behind the house, did you?"

"Nothing human has climbed that slope in living memory," Gerard said. "But it was a husband-wife thing, Hack. You know it almost always is. A knock-down, drag-out, this time. Mitch was gone from the pub for twenty minutes, remember."

"You've only got Parks's word on that." Bohannon winced and got to his feet. "I wish Mitch hadn't acted so stupid."

"Was it acting?" Gerard said. "I'd say that killing two wives in a row for their money suggests the man was born stupid." He picked up and let fall the file folder on the desk. "Still, he did have a good prison record."

"Model," Bohannon said. "Which sits well with wardens, but not always with the other inmates." He turned for the office door. Gerard's "Meaning?" stopped him. He turned back. "Meaning I wonder why Mitch had Eugenia buy that gun for him just after he got out of prison. What was he afraid of?"

"You think too much," Gerard said. "Do I hang onto Parks?"

"He tried to shoot me," Bohannon said. "Remember?"

"He thought you were a puma," Gerard said.

"Hang onto him," Bohannon said.

Settlers Cove was being built up fast, but Cholmondeley Road still had most of its pines. The houses stood far apart, a good many of them hidden by the trees, some up above the winding lane, some nestled down below. Roadside mailboxes were all that gave away the presence of most. And parked cars, of course. A few yards down the

road and across from the Russell house, a little woman in an electric blue pants suit, a sky blue blouse, and a scarf of many blues, was loading flat, brown-wrapped parcels into the back of an elderly station wagon. Bohannon lurched the stake truck into the shallow ditch, got out, and walked over to her. She was well past sixty, but with a pretty, amused face, and the bluest eyes he had ever seen. She tilted her head at him.

"Something I can do for you?"

He gave her his name and showed her his license. "You see anything unusual over at the Russell place yesterday afternoon? Hear anything?"

"What's happened?" Three more flat parcels leaned on the side of the wagon. With small, freckled hands she laid them one by one on the others in the back of the station wagon. "Something serious, wasn't it? Police cars were there last night. Around ten thirty. The ambulance. Dr. Hesseltine's car. I went across this morning, but the house is shut up. No one answers at the pub. What's wrong?"

"I was there last night," Bohannon said. "I know about last night. I want to know about the afternoon, around five."

"Is it Eugenia who's sick, or Mitch?"

"She had an accident," Bohannon said. "At five o'clock."

"Oh, no. Poor, lovely thing." The little woman stretched to reach and slam down the door. "She's in the hospital, then?"

"She's dead," Bohannon said. "Someone shot her. And what I want you to tell me is if you heard the shot."

The little woman stared, the blue of her eyes seemed to fade a little. "Dead? Shot?" She pressed both hands to her mouth and blinked hard to keep tears from coming. "Oh, what a shock." She looked around at the woodsy place. "Here? A murder? In Settlers Cove? What's the world coming to?" Bohannon looked up with her at the serene blue sky above the swaying tall pines for a moment. He didn't comment. He waited for her. She took a breath, looked at him, and said, "I didn't hear any shot. But I rolled up here to park just after five. I'd been at Stern's gallery in San Luis." Her withered cheeks flushed. "They're giving a show of my paintings." She moved a hand to indicate the parcels in the car. "And I'm helping to hang them."

Bohannon smiled. "I'll have to go take a look. What did you see when you got here at five?"

"A young blonde girl," the woman said, "come running down the stairs over there. She climbed on a red motor scooter, and she shot off down the road. It wasn't five on the dot. I know."

I was ten awful minutes late. Bert gets frantic if I'm not home when I say I'll be. And I'd promised him five."

"Ten after, then," Bohannon said. "You know the girl?"

"Not her name, no. But I've seen her before. She visits the Russells often." The blush came back. "Well—not both of them. She only comes when—when Eugenia's out."

"When Mitch is there alone," Bohannon said.

"I hate malicious gossip," she said. "But this is different, isn't it? I'm a witness, aren't I?"

"You sure are," Bohannon said. "Tell me your name."

He parked the stake truck in front of the Coach and Four, beside an old stagecoach with boxes of nasturtiums on its seat and in its windows. The sea breeze had stiffened. It swung the signboard so the hinges creaked. He walked into a patio with flaring bougainvillea in dark shades of red, where there were white metal tables under striped umbrellas. The door to the Coach and Four had diamond shaped panes of opaque glass and a lock that was no problem to pick. He walked into a small entry hall that had standing racks for hanging coats and hats on. He missed his hat. He'd have to buy a new one. The little entry hall was darkly paneled, and so

was the barroom itself. The bar was at the back of the room under racks in which drinking glasses hung upside down. Behind the bar was a long cabinet where a mirror reflected standing bottles of liquor. The bar had elaborate tap handles. At the side of the room, keyboard covered, stood a piano, clean ashtrays stacked up on it, clean glass bowls to hold peanuts, but holding nothing today. The small tables had paper coverings, or plastic, something not cloth. The room smelled of furniture polish and beer. And it was empty and silent.

But he heard a sound in back. He opened the door beside the bar and found himself in a hallway. MEN said a door on one side. LADIES said the one across from it. He moved on and came into a kitchen where a refrigerator hummed. There was no one there. The sound reached him again. He opened a door, but this led into a side room—the room into which the theatergoers came when there were plays. And there were the doors that led into the theater itself, and it was from beyond those doors that the sounds were coming. Someone was prying nails. He turned the knob of the twin doors, but they were locked. He rapped with his knuckles. No one came.

He let himself out and walked around behind the building to

a dirt parking lot where an old jeep waited under a big, shaggy pepper tree. The back wall of the place was blank white in the sun. He walked to the far side, and there was a set of steps, a stoop, and a door that gaped partway open. He went inside and was backstage. The air smelled of greasepaint. The squeal of nails was loud here. It was dark and, used to the brightness outside, he blundered into dusty curtains. He pawed them aside and stepped onto a small stage. A ladder leaned in front of the stage. He saw part of a man standing on the ladder in dirty jeans and worn tennis shoes. Bohannon jumped down off the stage, stood in front of the first row of seats, and looked up at the man.

"What's going on?" Bohannon called.

"I made this." The man was Pete Carmody. "It's mine. I'm taking it home. Mitch says there's not going to be any more theater. I don't want it boarded up here in the dark. Took me time to make. Why should the termites have it?"

It was a big shield, white, gilt, crimson, with masks of comedy and tragedy, laced with carved ribbons. The inscription read, *All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.* The shield looked heavy. Bohannon wondered how Carmody, skinny and far from

young, planned to get it down. "Don't you want help?"

"I am the help," Carmody grunted, prying up another nail. "I've been the only help Mitch had around here from day one. Oh, I could've acted—did some of that when I was young. But that wasn't what he needed. What he needed was workers. Whoa!" With a groan, the shield came loose and leaned outward. Carmody dropped the crowbar. It bounced at Bohannon's feet. Carmody was leaning forward hard, propping the shield with both hands. The tendons in his scrawny neck stood out, his face turned red. But he went on with his chatter. "Mitch kept asking for volunteers, and getting them. Trouble was, when the time came they didn't show up. Only Pete Carmody, softest touch in town." He began to try to come down the ladder, but when he took a foot off the rung he'd been standing on, to put it on the next rung down, the shield lurched to the side. Carmody grabbed for it frantically, but he couldn't hold it. It crashed to the floor in front of the stage and split in half. "Damn," Carmody said.

"You should have let me help you," Bohannon said. "We could have rigged a rope and pulley."

"I can put it together with pegs and glue." Carmody came down the ladder. "It'll be okay." He studied Bohannon. "You're

the one owns the horse stables up Rodd Canyon, right? Used to be a deputy? My name's Carmody."

"Bohannon," Bohannon said, and shook the man's gritty hand. "When was it Mitch told you he was closing the place?"

"Didn't come as a real big surprise," Carmody said. "I could see the way the wind was blowing." He crouched disconsolately by his broken handiwork. "Felt awful about it, though. Place has kept me busy for a year, now. Always loved the theater. This was kind of a life's dream come true, you know? I carpentered here, built the sets, painted the flats, rigged up the lights, put in the sound system. I'm going to miss it, damn it. And so are a lot of other retired old coots around here. Made us feel alive. Kept us from going to seed."

"What explanation did Mitch give you?" Bohannon said.

"Didn't have to explain." Sourly, Carmody rose and pushed at the shield with a foot. "I came over yesterday with a copy of the script, to try to work out a light plot. Parked my jeep in back, like always, came in the door back there—" he pointed "—and found Mitch in here, on the stage, bottle of whisky in his hand, reciting Shakespeare." Carmody turned and waved a thin arm. "To the empty seats. He didn't hear me.

I stood and listened. It was Prospero's speech from *The Tempest*. You know the one—everybody knows it:

*Our revels now are ended.
These our actors . . .
Are melted into air, into
thin air;
And like the (something)
fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers,
the gorgeous palaces,
The (something) temples,
the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit,
shall dissolve
And like this insubstantial
pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind:
We are such stuff
As dreams are made on,
and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep . . .*

I applauded, and he turned around like he'd heard a shot. Damn near dropped the bottle, he was so surprised."

"What time was this?" Bohannon said.

"Quarter past five. I had a lot of fool errands to run for my wife, took up most of the afternoon. I meant to get here by two. But she kept thinking up this thing and that. Finally dumped the clothes from the cleaners and ran for my car. She calls, 'Now you be sure and get home for supper,' and I said, 'You'll see me when you see

me.' I begged Mitch not to close the theater. He said it was Eugenia's decision. She held the purse strings. Nothing he could do. It was breaking his heart. There were tears in his eyes. Then he remembered he had customers in the pub, and ran back there."

"He was tending bar alone? Eugenia wasn't there?"

"She went home at five," Carmody said.

"What tipped you off that Mitch was going to close down the theater? You say you weren't surprised. He told me it was keeping him too busy. Eugenia never got to spend any time with him alone. It was bad for their marriage."

"What was bad for their marriage—" Carmody bent and picked up the crowbar "—was the young girls that came to act in the plays. He couldn't keep his hands off them. Peg McKinley, Sandra LeFebre, I don't remember all their names. But the last one, Tawny Giles—her I won't forget."

"Rides a red motor scooter?" Bohannon said. "Blonde?"

"Little sexpot. Pretty, of course. But that's not hard to be at her age." Carmody snorted. "Seventeen! They know it all, can't tell them anything. I warned her." His mouth twitched. "I won't repeat what she told me to do."

"Warned her of what?"

"Why, she'd snuggle up to Mitch, nuzzle his ear, kiss him, put her hand in his pocket—anyplace around here, anyplace at all, any time. 'Eugenia's got eyes and ears,' I told her. 'She's no dummy. None of my business what you and Mitch get up to, but get up to it in private. You'll destroy him, if you keep this up.'" Carmody looked at Bohannon, shook his head, and gave a sour laugh. "Mitch lied to you, Bohannon. It was Tawny Giles that got this theater closed down."

The house was weathered wood, maybe five years old, on a street two blocks from the beach in Los Osos. The blacktop on these streets was often covered in sand. The yard of the house was sand. A dime store wading pool in garish red and yellow stood in the yard, toys floating in it. He stepped around a tricycle on his way past the open garage to the front door. The red motor scooter waited in the garage. Beyond an aluminum screen door, the house door hung open. He heard television sounds, squeaks, tire-skids, xylophone music. Someone was watching cartoons. He pressed a bell button, and Tawny Giles came to the door in a little white halter, little white shorts, flip-flap rubber sandals. She squinted at him, reached and clicked the

screen door lock, and asked warily, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Bohannon gave his name, showed his license. "You were seen yesterday, running away from the Russell house in Settlers Cove. At five ten in the afternoon. By a neighbor."

"Oh, God," Tawny Giles said. Then she shook her head. Hard. Blonde hair swirling. "No, it's a lie. I wasn't there. I couldn't be. My mom works part time. I have to babysit the twins in the afternoons. Every afternoon."

"All you say," Bohannon told her, "the sheriff can check on—you understand that? Eugenia Russell is dead, murdered. Somebody shot her. At just about five o'clock. There was a gun in the house. You were familiar with the house. Flora Weymouth says you visited there pretty often."

"Aren't you the sheriff?" she asked.

"Private investigator," Bohannon said. "But if you'd rather talk to the sheriff, I can get him over here. I just thought maybe you'd prefer to talk to me."

"I didn't kill her," Tawny Giles said.

"You were having an affair with her husband," Bohannon said. "And Eugenia found out about it, didn't she? And you knew she knew. And you knew she was raising hell with

Mitch. So you went to kill her."

"No, no. I didn't." Tears and desperation raised her voice. "I mean—yes, I knew she knew. She telephoned me and said she wanted to talk to me about it, face to face. I was to come to her house at two o'clock, but I said it would have to be five because of the babies. Then my mom was late, so I was late too, right?"

"And she was already dead," Bohannon said.

"How did you know?" Her eyes opened wide.

"I didn't. I only knew you were going to say so. Okay, did you see anybody? Was anybody else in the house?"

"No." She shuddered. "I was too scared. I ran out of there so fast, I almost fell down the stairs."

"What about when you arrived?" Bohannon asked. "Did you see anything or anybody unusual then?"

"What?" She frowned, then her face cleared. "Yes." She snapped the lock, twisted a squeaky knob, and came outside into the sun. She was excited, and stood close to him, speaking up into his face. "I saw an old wreck of a car, one of those gas-guzzlers, all right? With the paint rubbed off in places, you know, and the chrome all rusty? Upholstery hanging down. It passed me, tearing out of Cholmondeley,

just as I got to the crossroads. Almost hit me."

"Did you get a look at the driver?" Bohannon said.

She nodded eagerly. "Dark. With fuzzy hair. He needed a shave. And he had his lips pulled back. Like he was snarling, okay? And his two front teeth were missing."

"Why didn't you call the sheriff?" Bohannon said.

She stepped back. "Are you crazy? And have my folks find out about Mitch and me? They'd ground me for life." The screen door burst open. Two very small humans came out. One male, one female. Both sunburned. Both had little red swim trunks pulled over their heads. And that was all they had. "Michael," Tawny Giles said sharply, "Jennifer. Look at you. Get back in that house this minute, do you hear me?" But they only went on giggling, and began chasing each other around and around on the sand.

Bohannon laughed and went away.

"Maybe she made it up," Bohannon said. "But driving over here, I got to wondering about Mitch's time in prison. He's scared to death of going back. He says the inmates are animals. He had Eugenia buy him that gun when he got out."

Gerard was frowning over papers at his desk, shuffling them, making jottings with a ballpoint pen. "Go on."

"Can you check?" Bohannon stood at a window, staring out at the parking lot, watching the moving shadows of the big old trees on the tarmac. "With San Quentin? Maybe some enemy of his in there got out in the last day or two, and came to frame him for murdering his second wife, and send him back to prison. The two missing front teeth ought to help identify him."

Gerard laid down the pen, rocked back in his plastic-cushioned, green metal desk chair. He stretched, yawned. "His name is Hawley Morris Schumacher, Hack. We've got him in a holding cell. He booked into the Sea Breeze motel last night, and this morning he tried to rape the maid when she came to do the room. She knocked him down with a vacuum cleaner and yelled bloody murder, and when he ran for his car and tried to get it started, a couple of surfers got him."

"You're kidding," Bohannon said.

"He'd been over in Settlers Cove yesterday all right." Gerard peered into his empty coffee mug. "Walked into three houses—people can't remember to lock up—and took a TV, a VCR, a food processor, a micro-

wave: trunk of his car was full of stuff. I believe Tawny Giles saw him, all right. But not coming from the Russell place. We tested his hands. He hadn't fired any revolver. And he isn't just out of San Quentin. He's down from Washington State. Skipped parole up there. Where are you going?"

"To talk to a nagging housewife," Bohannon said.

When he dropped down out of the stake truck on a wornout hook of road behind Madrone, he looked for the old jeep any place around the plain white one story house, and didn't see it. The roof of the house sagged and its silver-green composition shingles needed to be replaced. He climbed a pot-holed driveway of pebbly gray blacktop and saw out back a shabby garage. The doors stood open. Inside was a workshop, all kinds of saws and drills and planers. Tools hung over a workbench. Coils of wire hung from rafters. Lengths of one by twos, two by fours, four by fours lay along the rafters. So did lengths of lead pipe, copper tubing. There were metal racks of small drawers for nails and screws and the like. No rolls of roofing paper. Bohannon laughed to himself and went along the side of the house to the kitchen door. Front doors in neighborhoods like this

got little use. He rapped on an old wooden screen door.

The woman who called "Who's that?" in a fluty voice, and then appeared at the door, wiping her hands on an apron, didn't look like a nag. She was plump and rosy. A strand of gray hair fell over a forehead damp from cooking heat. Her eyes were brown and shiny. "Oh." She looked startled. "I don't know you." She looked doubtful. "You're not selling something? We're retired people. We have no money."

"I'm not selling anything." Bohannon explained who he was, showed his license yet again. "There's been a death," he said. "Eugenia Russell."

"Oh, dear." She reached and unhooked the screen door, and pushed it open so he could come in. "That's sad. She was a young woman. It's about the theater, then. You'll be wanting to talk to my husband."

"No, I've talked to him," Bohannon said. "I don't see his car here. So let me ask you. There's something I think I didn't get straight. He told me he'd run a lot of errands for you yesterday afternoon."

She'd gone to a counter, a butcher-block breadboard, and was kneading dough, watching him as she punched it down, turned it over, folded it, punched it down again. Now she stopped and frowned, pulling away

dough that had stuck to her fingers. "He did? I wonder why? We get mixed up sometimes as we get older. I hope you don't, but I expect you'll learn that in time."

Bohannon smiled. "I expect so. You didn't send him out again and again? To the dry cleaners, for example?"

"Oh, dear, no. The dry cleaners was on Monday." She laughed sadly to herself and wagged her head. "Yesterday, as a matter of fact, he went out about a quarter to two, I'd say. Said it was about the theater. He spends a lot of time puttering around down there, you know. He complains about how hard Mitch works him, takes him for granted, all that nonsense, but he really loves it. He'd be lost without it." She quit kneading again, laughed, pushed the strand of hair back with the back of a wrist. "And I'll be honest—it's nice having him out from underfoot sometimes."

"What time did he come home yesterday?" Bohannon said.

"Five thirty," she said. "He seemed very happy."

"He didn't say why?" Bohannon asked.

"Oh, he'd been afraid the theater was going to close." She rattled pans out of a lower cupboard, set them side by side on the counter. "I don't know what it was all about." She dipped

fingers into a can of shortening and went to greasing the pans. "I listen to him talk about the theater, of course. I say, 'Mm-hmm,' and 'Is that so?' and 'Well, that sounds wonderful,' but I really don't hear. It's never been interesting to me. I'm just happy for Pete."

"I understand," Bohannon said.

She plopped white loaves of dough into the pans. "And yesterday, he had good news. The theater wasn't going to close after all." She bent and opened the oven door of an old range. The spring twanged. She set the pans inside, and closed the door. She turned and faced him, wiping her hands on her apron again. "There. That's done. Oh, listen. I haven't been hospitable at all. It's a warm day. How about some ice tea?"

"No, thanks," Bohannon said. "But can I use your phone?"

Gerard said, "He went out at a quarter to two because he'd overheard Eugenia on the telephone at the Coach and Four telling Tawny Giles to meet her at home at two. He figured she'd be there alone and he could plead with her not to make Mitch close the theater. She wasn't there, of course. He hadn't heard all the conversation, hadn't heard Tawny Giles, at the other end of the line,

change the time to five because of her baby-sitting obligations."

It was near sundown. Bohannon stood with whisky and ice in a plastic glass and gazed out the window again. He smoked a cigarette. Across the highway, the pines of Settlers Cove were silhouetted against a sky that kept changing colors—from blue to green, from green to gold, from gold to fiery red. Gerard sat at his desk, knot of his tie pulled down, collar open, beard stubble showing. It had been a long day. The whisky had come from a bottle in the bottom drawer of his desk. He opened the drawer again now and tilted the bottle a second time over his own plastic glass. He held the bottle out to Bohannon, who shook his head, and when Gerard had capped the bottle, put it back into the drawer, and shut the drawer, he said:

"So he waited, did he? All that time?"

"No." Gerard worked on his whisky. "He figured he'd mis-cued, and he drove the jeep back to the theater and hung around, fiddling with this and that, till he heard Eugenia's car start up out back. Then he followed her home."

Bohannon stepped to the desk to flick ashes from his cigarette into a green metal wastebasket. "And that was a little before five, right? And he begged

and pleaded and argued with her, and when he wouldn't take no for an answer and refused to leave, she got the gun."

Gerard nodded wearily. "From a sideboard in the dining area. And he wasn't having that, not from a woman. He stepped up to take the gun away from her, and she put up a struggle. That's when her heel broke, like as not. And then, somehow, he had the gun in his hand, and was backing away, when it went off. That's how he tells it. It just fired, all by itself. He didn't mean to kill her."

"She's just as dead as if he did," Bohannon said.

Gerard gave his head a grim shake, and drank more whisky. "I don't know why people won't phone us, why they think they have to settle these things themselves. With guns. She seemed brighter to me than that."

Bohannon grunted, bent over the wastebasket, snubbed out his cigarette on the metal. His bruises ached and he straightened up, wincing. "He was happy when he got home—did I tell you? Told his wife the theater wasn't going to close, after all. What do you think—is he senile?"

"He was sly with you," Gerard said, and drank some more whisky. "Taking his work of art out of there today, telling you it was going to close, mourning

about it. Giving no inkling he knew Eugenia was dead. Trying to frame Tawny Giles for the murder. Not senile. I don't think so."

"He knew when Eugenia had left the Coach and Four." Bohannon finished off his whisky, dropped the empty glass into the wastebasket with a rattle. "No one else did, barring Mitch, of course." Bohannon walked heavily toward the office door. "That bothered me, when I came to think about it."

"I take back what I said," Gerard said.

Bohannon's hand was on the doorknob. "What was that?"

"That you think too much." Gerard rose and gave him a tired smile. "You've done it all, Hack. And I appreciate it. You're one smart cop. You ought to come back to work."

"You know better than that," Bohannon said, and left.

Bohannon limped in at the kitchen door. "Sorry I'm late." Plates lay on the table, glinting in the last glow of sunset through the windows. A big bottle of ketchup glinted, too. It was a fixture in the middle of the table whenever Stubbs cooked. The air of the big plank room was rich with good smells. Bohannon dragged out his chair, sat at his place. Stubbs, a fat, ruddy old man, turned from the

stove, came holding with quilted oven mittens a brown crockery pot. He set it on a pad, and lifted the cover. "See," he said, "you ruined my souffle."

"Looks like beef and beans to me," Bohannon said.

"Started out a souffle," Stubbs said. "You being late turned it like that."

"What's this?" Bohannon picked up the newspaper that lay folded beside his plate while Stubbs used a big spoon to ladle onto the plate plump beans in a rich sauce of molasses laced with mustard. Chunks of browned and tender beef came with the beans. The headline on the paper Stubbs had turned up for him to see read POPULAR BAR OWNER SLAIN, HUSBAND SOUGHT. Bohannon laid the paper down. "Not any more," he said, and tucked a napkin in at the collar of his shirt. "It was Pete Carmody who killed her."

Stubbs, wrapped in an apron, dishing out his own supper from the pot, blinked at him. "The skinny old guy? The handy-man?" Stubbs left the spoon sticking out of the pot, set the cover on, pulled off the mittens, untied his apron and laid it with the mittens on an empty chair. "What in the world for?" He sat down to eat, smacking his lips.

And Bohannon told him what for.

"Well, in that case—" Stubbs

had been ruining his beans with a big dousing of ketchup, and now set down the ketchup bottle and pushed back his chair "—I can let my prisoner go."

Bohannon stared at him in the shadows. "What are you talking about?"

"Ruby wandered off this morning." Stubbs got painfully to his feet. He had been a rodeo rider the first half of his life and it had left him pretty well crippled up in the second half. "And you know where she always goes when she takes these fits. Up the box canyon. So I rode up there with a bridle to lead her back."

Bohannon looked around the dim table. "Bread?"

"Doggone it," Stubbs said, and hobbled off to get a loaf, a knife, and from the refrigerator a cold chunk of butter. "I'm recounting a fascinating anecdote here. Can't you forget your stomach for a minute?"

"Have to have bread—" Bohannon sawed a slab from the loaf "—to mop up the gravy. You know that. And it's not fascinating." He wiped the bread around the beans and beef on his plate. "Ruby pulls that stunt all the time."

"Ruby's only the prologue," Stubbs said. "I'd started back with her when I seen the crossbar on the doors of the shed up there is missing. Lock's busted. I got down to have a look inside. And guess what's in there? Your pickup."

"You're kidding," Bohannon said.

"And guess who's sitting in it, sound asleep?"

"Mitch Russell," Bohannon said. "How about that?"

"So I backed out real quiet, shut the doors, and put the crossbar back. And I guess it's time to go let him out, isn't it?"

"I hope he's got my hat," Bohannon said.

UNSOLVED

by
Jerome Meyer

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the March issue.

Mr. Randolph bought his wife a Christmas present of nine real pearls, all exactly alike in appearance and size. The day after the purchase the jeweler who sold the pearls called Mr. Randolph and told him one of the pearls was a fake and could be detected because it weighed less than the others. Mr. Randolph tried to find the fake pearl by weighing each pearl but soon gave it up as a bad job. He took the nine pearls to the jeweler who located the lighter pearl in only *two* weighings. How did he do this?

See page 134 for the solution to the January puzzle.

"The Nine Pearls," taken from Puzzle Quiz & Stunt Fun by Jerome Meyer. Copyright © 1948, 1956, 1972 by Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

FICTION

The Sailing

by Jas. R. Petrin

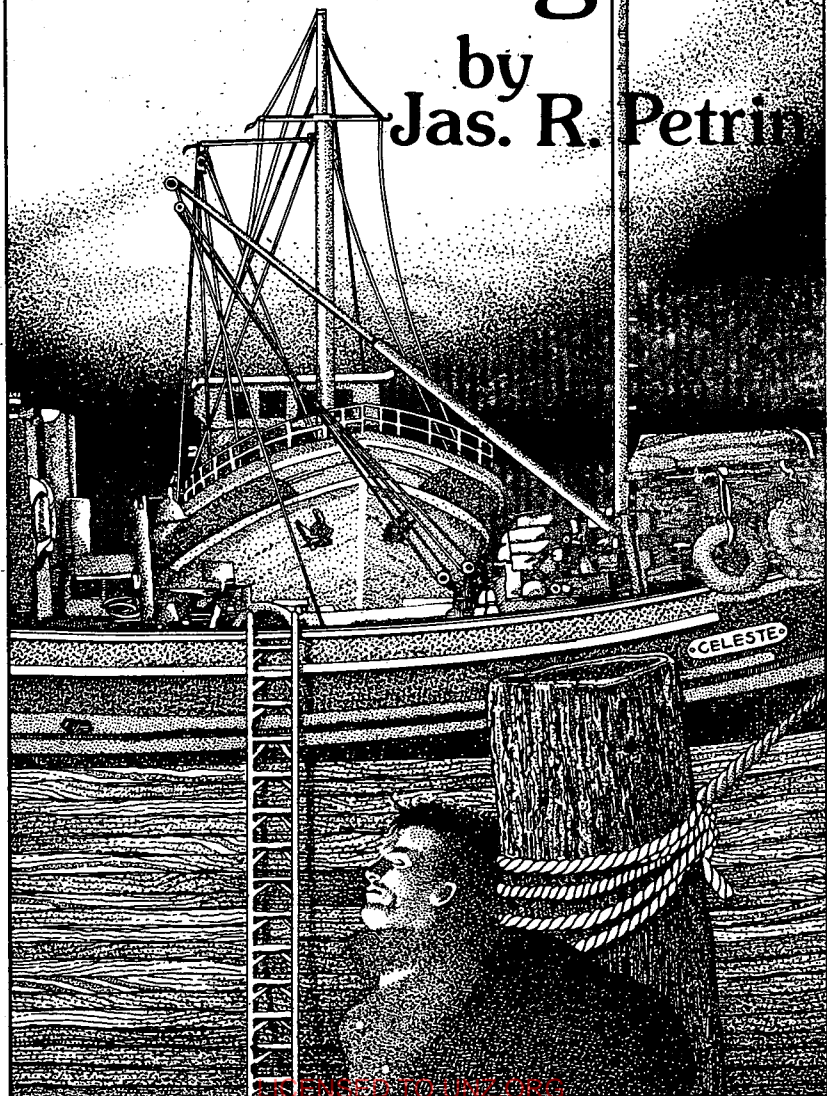


Illustration by Kurt Wallace

There was no way of knowing the man had only hours to live, no way of warning him.

Bridge sat content in his usual place, on his cushion, on his soap box, on the bluff above the docks, not forcing his pencil, letting the shipyard, the warehouses, the long, dark, empty slips spread themselves out in charcoal shadows under his hand. The dense August heat had brought a rare haze to the sky, a wash of unusual blues, and he made a quick note of the tints in his margins.

He was surprised to find that he wasn't alone: there were a few other people braving the afternoon sun. The police chief's car had slunk by on catspaw tires. And old Lovlo had crept like a black beetle down the cobbled street below, tilted himself into the road, limped along the back fence of his boatyard, pried up the loose stretch of wire, passed through, drawn it shut behind him, vanishing.

Lovlo, and now this strange man.

He had a brown rugged face like the back of a catcher's mitt, and teeth like the leather stitching. A small man, rugged as a post: you could have nailed a sign on him.

His eyes were fixed damply on Bridge's sketch. His timid voice was a surprise. "S'cuse me. Got a flat. No tire iron."

Bridge pointed to his truck. "Under the seat."

"Thanks. Name's Sanforth." The man stuck out a timid hand as though he feared to lose it.

Bridge sat on his box in quiet wonder as Sanforth took on the flat tire, squatting before it, puzzling over the hub cap. He made a few passes with the tire iron like a magician moving a wand. The tire did not repair itself. An unexpected woman projected a massive head from the car to make Bridge jump. "Nearly done? We can't miss the sailing."

Bridge put down his pencil.

He had the tire changed in under four minutes.

Mrs. Sanforth was a very large woman. Not fat—large. She got out of the car as though extracting herself from a tight-fitting, fragile garment. But once on her feet she moved with the weightless grace of so many large people. Like a canal boat drawn by ropes.

"You are a true Samaritan," she said, extending to Bridge a large red paw. "And you are an artist, Mr. . . ."

"People call me Bridge."

"I want to shake your hand, Mr. Bridge."

The hand pursued him.

"I'm grimy, ma'am, from the wheel . . ."

"I don't mind the soil of honest labor." She pounced on his hand and worked it, pumping,

pumping, not letting go, as though honest labor were a soil she couldn't get enough of.

"We're here for the coastal excursion," Mr. Sanforth offered, leaning around her broad back.

"The *east* coast," added Mrs. Sanforth with weight, as if that was in doubt. She opened a purse the size of a lobster trap and extracted a scrap of paper. "Here," she said, "from the newspaper back home in Racine: Bluebeard Excursions. Do you know it?"

Bridge didn't. "Must be new. I've been away—art school."

"Established 1906, Mr. Bridge, not begun yesterday." She read aloud: "Block 75, Seawall Road. Eighteen miles out of town, south. There should be a sign—then a sharp right-hand turn."

Bridge thought. "I remember an old quarry . . ."

"Well, we'll find it. Never mind." Mrs. Sanforth snapped her purse shut to keep the lobsters in and displayed many teeth. "You been so nice, you got to let Myron buy you dinner. We haven't checked in yet, but we got rooms reserved at the Capeview—you know where *that* is? Meet you there at seven. Come on, Myron."

She led her husband away like a bad boy, buckled the car around her, and waved like a stonemason from the window

until she was claimed by a bend in the road.

Bridge's pencil raced. The scene below was changing fast as the sun edged along. Far out in the harbor a tug was creeping an oil rig along; closer in, a ferry trailed a feather of white foam; and directly below, in Lovlo's tangled yard, dark shadows grew under the rusting hulk of the *Celeste*.

But now the light was wrong.

Bridge got up, stretched, put his paper, his paints, his pencils into his box, and all of it into the cab of his truck.

Some gulls dived in a quarrel over Bridge's head, screaming like girls. "Those two swiped my tire iron," he told them.

The desk clerk at the Capeview was gourd-shaped and fussy, and fluttered his hands a lot as though drying a manicure. Bridge knew him from school days: Rocksy, the boy most likely to sleep with the team mascot.

If Rocksy remembered Bridge, he didn't let on.

"The Sanforths," he said, as though it were a skill-testing question. He fondled a computer, which blinked. "*They* aren't in my database. You're sure they said the Capeview?"

"I'm sure."

A glitter of fingernails.

"But they aren't in my database."

Bridge sometimes wished he were a violent man; some people begged for a cuff in the ear. "Please, try again—Rocksy."

Rocksy frowned. Perhaps his childhood name was not a favorite with him. He turned to prod his machine. It beeped, stopped dead, whirred, and finally blinked. "My mistake," he said softly, as though his superiors were listening. "Here it is in the dead file: Mr. and Mrs. Sanforth, Room 328. But they never checked in."

"You're sure of *that*?"

Rocksy bristled. "The machine is sure. They were supposed to check in by one o'clock today. They didn't, so the machine buried them in the dead file." He stroked his keyboard. "It's never wrong."

Bridge pushed out onto the terrace, needing air. Rocksy had deserted mascots for machines: nothing stayed the same.

He sank into a cane chair, signaling for a beer he didn't want. He felt uneasy about the Sanforths. What could have held them up?

The Capeview terrace was a balcony seat on the bay; he ought to have brought his paints. The sun sloped over the dozing town. Along the sea the buildings stood like ragged cardboard cutouts: tumbled grey shacks curving away to Chebucto Head, which rose black and sullen over the harbor like

a monument to a dying town.

It takes a while, he thought, for a town to die: they don't go easily. Like a stranded whale, Chebucto had been in its death throes for some time. It had begun with the loss of the beaches, the heavy seas one year that had carried off most of the sand. Summer people, their shallow roots in that sand, soon drifted away with their wallets and checkbooks, and half the restaurants, gift shops, and excursion boats went with them.

He wondered what bold entrepreneur had begun Bluebeard; and what equally bold tourists would send them money . . .

The Sanforths . . .

He inspected his watch. Nine o'clock. They weren't coming.

He could take a run himself along that Seawall Road, drive the same eighteen miles, watching out for that sign, ready for that sharp right-hand turn. And he could check with Rosie at the visitors' booth about Bluebeard Excursions. What Rosie didn't know about Chebucto wasn't worth knowing.

He stood up, reaching for the last of his beer. A hand caught his arm like a steel pincer. There was an odor—old Lovlo.

Lovlo was the crustiest old salt in town, a caricature out of *Moby Dick*. A rime-streaked seaweed beard, a black wool cap, an open, gusting pea

jacket—he might once have rounded the Horn with Ahab himself.

In fact, though his great-grandfather had built the town shipyard, Lovlo had never been to sea. Worse, after his father died he ruined the business. It was one of those private shames which ought to be a man's secret but rarely is: a thing that drew small silent smiles from the hunched and oak-carved men of the waterfront. But he bore it like a real sea dog, making no apologies, going his way tough as tobacco and be-damned to the world.

"I don't see ye paintin' me up today."

He had the scent of week-old tuna.

"I was there this morning," Bridge said. "On the hill. And painting the whole town, not just you." Bridge edged away.

"Just paint the Lovlo. Shipyard; it is the whole town, son." Lovlo squeezed out a grizzled, red wink. "Four generations o' blood and guts—paint *that*." He put a grubby hand on the mouth of Bridge's beer. "D'ye mind?"

"You can have it," Bridge said, "now."

Rosie was the town historian and part-time mystic. And tonight she was her usual two hundred pounds of needling self.

"Painted any masterpieces

this week? Any Van Goghs? Renoirs? Voltaires?"

"Voltaire was a writer." He hated explaining things to Rosie; he always had the feeling she was patronizing him.

"You sure? Maybe he painted naughty things in secret. Did you come to buy me dinner?"

"No; but how about coffee?"

The mall was closing. She put up a "Gone Fishin'" sign and led Bridge across the street to the bus depot diner. She liked the cream pies there, and the strawberry tea.

For himself, Bridge ordered coffee, black, no sugar.

Rosie made a face. "Now I can't read your tea leaves for you. Don't you want your fortune told? And no pie. You might as well be a monk. Do you sleep on a stone slab?"

He asked about Bluebeard. She crinkled her eyes and rolled in the booth like a huge jelly, gurgling.

"You tell me," she said, "who'd finance a business in this town nowadays, and I'd pull *my* money out of that bank before the next audit—if I had any."

"You're saying there's no such bank."

"And you're bright for an artist."

"But the Sanförths . . . They were so certain."

"It's a gag. To get you hoping." Rosie dug into her second slice of pie. "You're so damn se-

rious, they probably couldn't help themselves. I bet they're in Cape Cod by now, hooting over it. Booking a room makes it even richer. Look at you, running around worried, dragging fat ladies out to dinner."

"I never asked you out to dinner. Coffee, just coffee."

"Won't even buy a girl pie, huh? Can't afford it. A penniless artist. You live on stale pizzas in a garret, right?" She seized Bridge's wrist. "Don't be ashamed around me—I live over a chicken shop. Ask me up sometime, show me your etchings, introduce me to your slab."

Bridge patted her hand.

"Bluebeard," he said. "I have to know, Rosie."

"Why?" She went sullenly to her pie.

"I'm not sure. Maybe I just want my tire iron back."

"I bet you want the old lady. You want to proposition her, steal her away to Rio. Be warned, kid, those romances don't last. It'd be separate slabs in separate garrets before a month was up. Ever seen a Brazilian garret? Bad news."

Bridge had to smile. "You're crazy, Rosie. That's why I love you."

She sniffed. She composed her face with a serviette. "You want to know about Bluebeard Excursions? All right. It never existed."

"Never?"

"Not here. Not in this hemisphere, not in this century."

Bridge put down five dollars.

"For the coffee, *and* the pie," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"Home."

"To your garret? Let me come."

"I have work to do."

"Then leave me a key. Tomorrow I'm off early. I'll warm up your slab for you."

She shouted after him:

"I'll buy you a new tire iron . . ."

The chief of police creaked his swivel chair, and folded his thick arms like a pacifist. "You *have* got something for me to go on?"

Bridge shrugged. "Not really—but I can give you a description . . ."

"I'm waiting."

"The man was small—smaller than normal. His wife was—well, she was bigger."

"Bigger than normal?"

"Yes."

The chief sniffed. "Right. A pigmy and a giantess. Any distinguishing features? Tattoos, amputations, eye patches? I'll get out an A.P.B. right away." Then, as if recalling an important point, he struck his forehead with the flat of his hand. "But there's a problem: we don't do *circuses*—they have their own cops."

Bridge stood up. "Listen, I was out there this morning. There's no such place and I'm worried. If you won't help, I'll talk to the mayor."

"Go ahead. Building next door. Two floors up. When he throws someone out, it's a long way down."

Before Bridge got the door closed, the chief shouted, "Which one of 'em carries the two-headed baby?"

The town hall was an old wooden building. No elevator. The shouts were echoing in the stairwell before he reached the first landing.

"Shut my electricity off? . . . crooks! the whole lot of you. The Lovlo shipyard built this town. Pay taxes? —we sweated 'em. But you've forgot all that with your damn tutti-frutti and neopolitan. You *and* the chief—pair of damn crooks!"

Bridge came up out of the stairwell to see a pretty ankle, a leg, then a young lady bracing herself against a ranting old Lovlo shaking his fist at a quick-closing door. A male clerk rushed to help and gentled Lovlo away.

"I have to see the mayor," Bridge told the flushed, pretty face. "The chief sent me. Name's Bridge."

She straightened her hair, took a breath, slipped in, then

out through the big mahogany door, all in complete silence.

"He'll see you." She was trembling.

"You okay?"

She nodded. "They won't really shut his electricity off, you know. It's only a threat."

The mayor was trim and grey-suited, with a salesman's lurking smile; he seemed ready to jump up and sell something. A huge inlaid desk dominated the room. He was about to speak, had dismantled his smile to do it, when the door crashed open.

Lovlo again. Still mad as hell. Flecks of spittle flying from his mouth.

"And don't think I don't know a few things about you, mayor. You're worse'n a crook, you're a damn—"

A beefy arm swept him out, crashing the door shut.

"Not a happy citizen," said Bridge.

"Only taxpayers have a right to be happy," the mayor said. "That man hasn't paid a cent of municipal tax in five years. Wants forgiveness. Asks for it every year. He must think I'm a priest." The mayor turned suspicious. "That's not what you're after, is it? Absolution?"

"I don't own any property."

The mayor's lip curled as if that was worse. "You some kind of vagrant?"

"An artist."

The curled lip became a grimace. Perhaps the mayor was suffering from gas. His eyes rolled to the door as if he expected relief from that direction. "An artist," he repeated. "You want a grant, right?"

"Nope. I'm trying to help some people out—friends. I think they might be in trouble."

The mayor hitched his glasses up with thumb and forefinger, pulling at his eyes. "So go for it. Us mayors got nothing but time."

He listened with his chin in his hand.

"You know what you're telling me? You're telling me to announce to the world that two *more* tourists are missing in Chebucto. That's after losing two last year, and two the year before that, and . . ." He groped in his pocket, fished out a ring of keys and threw them on the desk.

"Here," he said, "take them. Go round to all my ice cream stands, shut the power off, lock 'em up, don't stand in the way of the sun. A white tide will rise behind every door, finally break out in a pasteurized flood, a tidal wave of melted ice cream monsooning the town, floating my drowned body down to the poorhouse in the wreckage."

He pushed the keys across the desk.

"Want them?"

Bridge shook his head.

"Then get the hell out." The mayor scooped up the keys and fell back in his chair.

Bridge went to the door. The mayor stopped him.

"One more thing. Keep your trap shut about missing people. And don't hand me any of that 'free country' crap, either. I'll even make it worth your while—free ice cream forever, all you can eat, every day. And if you tell one soul I tried to bribe you, I'll say you were trying to sell me protection: a lifetime supply of ice cream, you demanded, or you'd break down my stands with a tall tale. Now, get out."

Bridge waited for two old ladies to be directed to the restrooms, then stretched himself across the information counter. "There are *more* missing tourists?"

Rosie nodded. "The Sanforths aren't the first to vanish around here. But no disappearance was ever traced directly to Chebucto."

"Name them."

"Name them, he says. What kind of memory do you think I've got? Just because I *look* like an elephant . . ."

"Rosie."

"Kipp—two sisters; Calley—retired couple; Brice-Jones—retired couple."

"Is that all?"

"Wassamatter? Not enough for you, Dr. Frankenstein? You want them by the hearse-load maybe? Six—pardon—eight stiff for a fish town like this ought to satisfy any grim reaper—even you."

"I never heard about any of this in New York."

"You wouldn't have. There wasn't much reported even here. I mean, nobody could be certain they'd gone missing exactly here in Chebucto Village."

"You mean there was no investigation at all? Like by Missing Persons?"

Rosie sniffed. "Maybe a long distance phone call or two. Not much more. Do you know how many people Missing Persons has on its lists?"

"No."

"Neither do I. But I'm sure if they ever found them all, the rest of us would have to suck in our guts to make room for *them*. I could make room for a few." She patted herself. "So you see why the mayor snapped at you. He imagines these disappearances being tied to Chebucto somehow, and our already sinking economy taking a quick header into Davy Jones's whats-it. That's why you weren't popular with him—it wasn't your antiperspirant."

"And old Lovlo?"

"He ain't popular with anybody. But then it's hard to be

chummy with a guy who smells like rotting fish. See, Lovlo keeps threatening to make a stink—pardon the pun—about the missing people. And of course the mayor don't like it. You wouldn't either if you had a ton of ice cream to get rid of, and another four tons on the way. It makes the mayor—testy."

"You sound as though you're defending him."

"Hell, no! Just trying to figure him, dear."

Rosie trembled herself, laughing.

"They're scared, don't you see? All of them. Scared of losing their hot dog stands, their gift shops, their suntan oil franchises. They're worried about murder, all right—worried about the six o'clock news murdering the whole damn town."

"Then they're sick," Bridge said. "We're talking about flesh and blood people here. Their attitude is sick."

"Maybe," said Rosie, "maybe not. They got a lot to lose. You got nothing to lose. Maybe in their place . . ."

"I'd act the same? Never!"

"Well," breathed Rosie, "we'll never know, will we? You're an artist. Artists never get rich unless they do nudes. Why don't you do nudes, Bridge? You could start with me. You could use a large canvas. You could use *me* as a canvas."

"Rosie, will you ever be serious?"

"Sure. I'll get serious with you anytime. Take me out tonight. We'll go for beers and see what happens."

Like a fool, Bridge said yes.

Rosie picked the bar—the Dead Man's Chest. A seaman's bar, not a tourist's, which these days was where you found the action. Bridge knew a few people; but Rosie knew everybody. She belted out the songs, howled at the jokes, topped up Bridge's mug whenever he looked away. He was just beginning to enjoy himself when somebody tossed Lovlo in through the door.

He sailed over a table like a Hollywood extra and hit the floor like a case of beer.

"Someone's after him," Rosie said, horrified.

And there was. A big man in a wool sweater striding, reaching, rooting him out from the table legs to smack him sprawling into a wall.

Old Lovlo, down among the boots and filtertips, skulking like a kicked dog along the wall, swaying, raising a damp red eye at a shout, struggling along on his knees while the catcalls and the cheers rolled over him . . .

Bridge felt the liquor grip him by the eyes. It was like a film: Rosie shaking her head,

her breasts swaying like beefs . . .

Lovlo lurched another table down.

"Strong as a horse," a waiter said; "we could tie a wagon to him."

"He's bust some bottles, he'll cut his hands."

"No blood in that one. I'm not worried."

Lovlo drove into a crowd of legs, sucking his gums and grunting, while a lady squealed and a man laughed. Emerging from the stamping leather and nylon, he seemed to have lost his directions. He swayed at the entrance to the ladies' room, his nose dripping blood.

"It's the men's, the men's, the men's," chanted the room.

Lovlo butted his head into the heavy door and trundled in under a mountain of laughter.

Bridge saw it all as though from a distance. Then there was Rosie, bulling through the tables like an ice breaker, into the ladies' and out again, Lovlo under her arm, steering for the door. Bridge lurched after her.

When the heavy, warm misting night caught him by the throat, Bridge had to bend for a moment over an open boat. A hooker studied him as though she liked his style.

"Hurry up with that," he heard Rosie snap. "I need the keys to your truck."

It was only two blocks to

Lovlo's shack; Rosie took five miles off the clutch. They had Lovlo propped between them like an invertebrate, his face black with blood; and Bridge kept the vent open and his own head out the window, gulping air.

Lovlo's shack was a maritime boneyard.

Bridge, through his private fog, had an impression of oak, canvas, brass, and ropes. There was a huge cracked figurehead, a barrel, a smell of oakum. He pushed a dog out of a cosy spot on a heap of old nets, closed his eyes, and gripped his knees tight so that the tide of sleep wouldn't carry him too far out and he sank swirling into deep waters like a sounding whale.

He awoke with a rotten taste in his mouth; he might have been eating plankton.

Rosie called from behind a heap of buoys: "I can't make him breakfast. There's nothing in the house."

Bridge climbed up through pain and found her moping under a ship's bell. Lovlo had rolled off his cot in the night and lay in his underwear, sprawled like death, his head in the dog's dish. Rosie had cleaned him up a bit, but his face and hands looked wrong: too weathered and dark for a body so smooth and hairless white. They were like odd parts stitched on.

Rosie said ruefully, "I wanted to make him breakfast."

"Let him sleep," said Bridge. "You've done what you could."

"I can do more. I can go downtown and give our chief of police a damned good lecture."

"What for?"

"I know his goons. It was them did this. They were in the doorway last night smirking: the ones that scowled at you." Bridge remembered no smirks, no scowls.

She gazed around sadly at the muddle, picked up an old sock and made a pathetic attempt at dusting a buoy. Bridge elbowed her out to the truck.

"I wanted to make him breakfast," Rosie said to the dashboard.

Bridge drove again out the Seawall Road. He had dropped Rosie off, still mooning about old Lovlo.

The sea was flat and grey and weak. It lifted and fell with a slight, slow life, like the breast of an old sleeping man. The line where it met the sky was blurred by a haze, so that they were one and the same, sea and sky, an immensity; then Spain.

The coast was rugged here, heaving the road at the sky and twisting over and down, so that the sea filled the view, then drained away again. This time at eighteen miles out he growled

right past the old quarry road; and he went on another mile before turning back. There was certainly no sign; and the only right-hand turn was the quarry road itself. He drove slowly back, pulled in at the quarry, and stopped.

It had been years since a truckload of stone had groaned up this old road on its way to become the waistcoat of some new building. They used plywood sheeting in town now; you could board it up easier.

He got out and walked. He didn't know what he hoped to find, but he was almost disappointed when he glanced into the ditch by the highway and found the cardboard.

“**T**his isn't how I imagined it,” said Rosie, blinking around Bridge's room. “You live bad for a starving artist.” She plucked up the hem of one cunningly draped table, exposing the beer case underneath. “What's this? Your luggage?”

“I'm not starving,” said Bridge; “not yet, anyway.”

“This is good, darling. I'm greatly relieved. True love means sacrifice, I know, but—” she struck her great breast “—this engine runs on premium fuel. So what did you find, cutie? Show and tell.”

Bridge pulled the cardboard

fragment out and laid it on the beer case table.

Rosie wrinkled her nose. “On your dining room table, love? Is that wise? You don't know where it's been.”

The cardboard had dried from soggy wet to musty damp.

“See this?” said Bridge, pointing to a faded logo. “RE-FEX. And here, a large letter B, in grease pencil. Isn't this evidence someone made up a sign saying Bluebeard Tours?”

“This is evidence?”

“Well, it's been torn; I don't have the other part. But think about it. The Sanforths were watching for a sign. Well here's one or at least a part of one, found near a right-hand turn on Seawall Road eighteen miles from town. The chief will have to listen now.”

Rosie sniffed. “You're forgetting something. Our chief doesn't have the I.Q. of a fire plug. He can't follow his nose, never mind your twisted logic.” She prodded the dank cardboard with her finger. “You'll have to bring him an entire sign before he'll listen, one six feet high in neon. Do your ego a favor, sweetbuns, don't even mention this thing to him.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?”

“We? What's this *we*, Sherlock?”

“I need help, Rosie.”

“I've already helped you.

Moral support—I didn't laugh. What more do you want? One thing's sure: if you go on sleuthing, you can't paint—you want I should pay your rent?"

"Maybe you can find out what REFEX means."

"Library. Directory of Manufacturers."

"Why didn't I think of that?"

"Because you're an *artiste*. You don't think. You feel." She pinched him. "And you feel pretty good, too. I'll do the library tour. You find the rest of this so-called sign."

Bridge walked the same ground as before: the pit road, the gate area, the quarry with its somber black waters. "The chief will have to drag that with hooks," he said; and, realizing the implications, shuddered. He didn't want the Sanforths to be down there drifting like waterlogged stumps.

He went carefully, eyes down, walking a grid, but found nothing. Dusk was falling. He wondered how Rosie was making out. . . .

He drove back into town under a low black sky drifting up like slate from the south, lightning winking and blinking far out to sea. A two-masted schooner drifted near shore. It might have been a Bruegel engraving; there was even a bird in the sky. "Heavy weather ahead," Bridge muttered.

It was dark when he drove into town. He stopped at a phone booth to call Rosie. Lovlo passed down the deserted street with his peculiar crablike gait; and a moment later, at walking speed, the chief's car glided by.

He dialed the phone to jangle Rosie out of her nightflying dreams above the chicken shop. And she *had* been dreaming.

"It was awful," she said. "There they were, those missing people, all sailing away and away, pleading their eyes at me like fish on a plate. They were hauling great long oars in rhythm. There was a sweaty man who beat them. They moved forward, back . . . forward, back, Nikons and Canons thumping their Madras shirts—"

Bridge was tired. "But what did you learn at the library?"

"Oh, that." She seemed disappointed. "Refex isn't a company, it's a product. Freon, whatever that is."

Bridge's eyes snapped open like a mama doll and he was awake, wide awake.

"Yes!"

He was at Rosie's door six minutes later, panting.

"Refex," he said through the door. It might have been a password. Rosie chain-rattled the door and took him in to wee-hours bacon and eggs.

"If my landlady finds out you've been here and haven't

done anything amorous, she'll throw me out—she's Latin." Rosie wafted a cloud of perfume at him. "Think I'm kidding?"

"Refex," Bridge told her through bacon.

"Right."

She watched him with sympathy.

"Refex," Bridge continued, "is a brand of freon. Freon is used in refrigeration. Refrigeration is used to keep ice cream. Which the mayor has tons of."

"Then," said Rosie, "you're thinking the mayor done it. Blipped the Sanforths over the head with a brick of ice cream. But motive, boy, motive. Why?"

"I don't know why—yet. But the finger points to him. And don't forget, he was against an investigation. Now it turns out he's the one with the Refex."

Rosie tipped her head to one side. "Forget this, Bridge."

"I can't forget it, Rosie."

She swelled herself with a sigh. "Such a waste. Me at your funeral stuffing mascara-stained tissues down my cleavage." She undid a button. "A waste. What is it with you artists? You got a death wish? Aren't I female? Aren't I soft? Aren't I warmer than a mortician?" She leaned forward to emphasize herself.

Bridge blinked.

"I'm going to see the mayor, all the same. I'm going to sit right here until his office opens."

"I suppose," said Rosie glumly, "I can tell my landlady you got a headache."

Nine A.M.
The mayor's secretary was red-eyed again. "He isn't here.

His wife called, frantic. He was gone all night."

Bridge and Rosie stared at her. "But where could he be?"

"As I told the chief, yesterday he received a note. From a businessman. They were to meet and discuss a new venture for Chebucto. He said he'd be gone twenty minutes—" She dabbed at her eyes.

"Not," broke in Bridge, "an excursion business?"

"Yes." She blinked suspiciously.

"On Seawall Road?"

But Bridge was halfway down the stairs, dragging Rosie and running before she could answer.

This time the chief listened. He scowled and grumbled, but he listened, staring at Bridge's fragment of cardboard as though making plans to fumigate his office.

Bridge faced the chief.

"So you're finally going to do something? God knows how many of them are drifting down there in that pit."

The chief put a fresh cigarette in his mouth, took it out, pinched a bit of tobacco from his

tongue, put the cigarette back in again. "Oh, I'll get the divers, all right. But maybe I'll start," he said, the cigarette wagging like an accusing finger, "by arresting you, Picasso."

"Me?" Bridge was indignant and shocked. "Why me, for heaven's sake?"

"For leaving the scene of a crime when I smack you and toss you down the stairs. So shut up, already, and let me do my own thinking."

The chief sat glowering like a hunchback.

Bridge glanced at Rosie. "See how he gets?"

They drove back to Rosie's in wordless quiet, watching the lightning spread itself in quick bright silences over the sea.

Rosie got out the teabags.

"I can't understand what's going on," Bridge said.

"Strange doin's, all right." Rosie shook her head at the kettle. "But I knew the mayor had nothing to do with your San-forths."

"Why didn't you say so, then?"

"And spoil your fun? Not me. You hardly get any."

There was a long silence. They both watched the kettle.

"I don't trust the chief, Rosie."

Rosie hooted and the kettle whistled. "I knew it," she said. "With the mayor out of the way, I just knew that was coming."

"Don't laugh. He's been act-

ing very strangely. I see him in odd places, cruising around, watching. He spies on Lovlo—did you know that?"

"Be fair now, sweetheart. It could be something innocent. Like he just wants to beat Lovlo up again."

"It wouldn't surprise me. But he's had plenty of chances if that's all he wants. I think Lovlo knows something, and I think the chief is planning to do something about it."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"You're the spiritualist. You tell me."

"I deal with the dead—the completely dead. The chief's only dead from the neck up."

"Funny."

"Yes. I'm a barrel of laughs. Or maybe just a barrel."

"Why do you always make fun of yourself?"

"I'm considerate. I like to save other people the trouble."

Bridge picked up his jacket. "Two can play the chief's game. I'm going to follow *him* around for a while."

"Right. Go for it. I'll get my tissues and my cleavage ready."

Bridge held the phone in front of him and yelled into it.

"You've got to come," he told Rosie, "they're going to bash old Lovlo again—the chief is. He's got a goon—I mean a man with him. I'm afraid they'll

kill the old guy this time."

"So what do you want me to do? Sit on someone?"

"Just be here, that's all. Maybe they'll back off with witnesses around. We'll shame them, Rosie. I'll do what I can till you get here."

"Sounds good, Bridge. They bring guns. We bring shame."

He ran for the truck, pulled a U-turn, and screamed the gears back to the hill. A few heavy splatters of rain were already on the windshield; there was some grumbling in the south and some fog rolling in: the elements were deciding how to take apart the town.

The chief and his goon had disappeared. Bridge scanned the street. The snout of the chief's car still protruded from the lane.

Bridge swallowed and started down the hill.

His belly muscles spring-steel tight, he reached the darkest shadows at the rear of Lovlo's shack. A dull yellow light fell in a shaft from a window and lit the tall weeds. Bridge pressed himself to the wall, gathered his courage up in bits, then edged himself up to the glass.

There was no one in the kitchen.

The table was as he remembered it, a wilderness of clutter: bottles of dried catsup, mustard, vinegar, steak sauce; empty pickle jars; spoiled paper

plates. A midden of a kitchen, sinking under its own weight, undisturbed by man.

No, not quite undisturbed. One of the kitchen chairs was overturned and lay like a thin man, knees up along the wall.

Violence!

There were two other rooms: the seafaring-warehouse-living-room-museum and the tiny bedroom. Both in darkness.

Bridge turned away and stared out at the long, shadowed ships of the yard. He ought to have heard anyone leave. Then a sudden light glowed and died in the dark.

He was hesitating, puzzled, when Rosie's cab came over the hill, a pair of jouncing headlights. She squeezed herself out at the gate and stood in the yard like a white mountain on a dark plain.

"I was expecting a punch-up. Where's the action?" She raised a large flashlight like a billy club. "You get me out here for nothing, sweetheart?"

"I don't know."

"He doesn't know. I'm loaded for bear, and he doesn't know."

"Keep your voice down, will you? I've checked the shack—nobody there. But just now I saw a light on the boat."

Rosie turned and blinked. "What boat?" There were a dozen landlocked hulks around them riding gently in a gathering milky mist.

"That big one—the *Celeste*."

She stared. "No light there now."

"There was. We've got to get on board her."

"There you go with that 'we' again."

The *Celeste* was poised at the water's edge, a hundred feet long, her rear deck some twenty or thirty feet from the ground.

Rosie snorted. "Want to stand on my shoulders? Better yet, I'll stand on your shoulders, then you can hold my legs."

Aft, they found a ladder. The mist was creeping in so fast they could no longer see the shack; a diesel mourned its way over the water out on the bay, but they could not see its lights. The ladder was a delicate thing, aluminum, bought from any hardware store; it met the ship's own steel rungs some fifteen feet higher up.

Rosie poked it with scorn; she leaned a foot on the bottom rung like a horse testing a bridge.

"Nothing to worry about," Bridge said, "hold up a house—government approved."

"If I was only a house, I'd trust you," said Rosie. "And if the government would sit on it, I'd trust them. As it is, I wouldn't stir my drink with this thing. You're on your own from here, cutie—follow me from in front."

Bridge crept cautiously up

the flexing ladder until he reached the ship's own steel rungs, then swarmed like a pirate to the deck.

"It's okay," he hissed down.

"Crap," she called up. "Go."

He padded into the shadow of a capstan to listen and lurk, crouching motionless, hands spread wide on the steel decking, nerve-endings keyed for vibrations, ears strained for any odd sound. He wasn't disappointed. From somewhere forward came the muffled tones of speech: a radio perhaps, or an actual voice.

He moved ahead, wearing the darkness like a cloak. He held tightly to the rail. This was a shipyard; the *Celeste* was brought here for repairs before being abandoned by her owners: there could be open hatches, large holes in the deck itself. Far out on the bay, a foghorn groaned.

I'm trespassing, he thought; I could be shot.

It was then something caught at his foot with a soft, cloying weight. With his hands, he explored, crouching.

A body. Definitely.

Without light, he couldn't tell who it was. But it wasn't Lovlo. It didn't smell.

He gained the forward deck of the *Celeste*, falling down no hatches, plummeting through no holes; but he froze when a

voice, close, very close, too close, said plainly:

"You ought to know where the mayor is—yer as big a crook as he is."

Lovlo.

Bridge had frozen at the first creak of the voice. It issued from somewhere below. An open port, he decided, in the side of the ship. He would not see into *this* window. He crouched where he was, a shadow in a shadow.

There was a scrape: perhaps a chair being drawn back. A second voice: the chief?

"I got you figured, Lovlo. You know more than you let on." A pause: a cigarette being lit or a glass being raised. "I seen you jawing to Picasso. And to big Rosie, too. I want to know what you been telling them."

"Ask 'em."

"I will. But I want to hear your side first. So you start. Now!"

A silence began, a silence under tension, stretching, stretching, growing longer, thinner, tighter, pulling Bridge with it like a winding spring . . .

It ended with a sudden crack and a four-letter howl from Lovlo.

"There he goes, he's starting." Bridge cast desperately about, yearning to help, not finding the means. He cursed. He had no weapon, nothing handy that would serve. Light-

ning lit the deck; there were some old steel drums, some links of chain he couldn't possibly lift . . .

Another clean, tight crack of a well-placed blow, a curse of pain.

Bridge wanted to roar. He wanted to get at the chief, grab him up in his angry artist's hands and mold him, twist him into something better. In frustration he gripped one of the steel drums, found it empty, surprisingly light, swung it high, high, high, and hurled it straight down at the steel deck.

It struck with a fantastic crash, an explosion that shook the whole ship. He blinked, then realized there had been a thunderclap.

There was a commotion below. Something fell, something broke. Quick feet tapped a companionway, somewhere a door flew back. Lovlo hurtled out of the dark, almost knocking Bridge down.

Bridge knew it was Lovlo.

It was the tuna.

"It's me," Bridge hissed, "Picasso. Come on." He hurried Lovlo along by the arm.

The old man hung back with astonishing strength.

"Why. . . ?" he began. "How come. . . ?"

"I came to rescue you."

"Ahhh . . . good lad." He extended an arm. "That way."

They hurried ahead. "How many of them are there?" Bridge asked.

"Only one—now. Had to careen the other one."

"I saw him. You've got a weapon?"

"Course." He fumbled a wicked length of wood out of his shirt. "Belaying pin. Antique. Got a fridge full of 'em."

Bridge remembered the scuffle below. "Did you . . . ?"

"The chief had it comin' to him. Missed, though. Caught him a glancing blow—hey! what you doin'?"

Bridge had taken the belaying pin. He didn't want the old man hurt in any scuffles. "Better let me take care of the chief."

The great wet boom of a fog-horn rumbled them, trembled the deck plates of the *Celeste*—the voice of a container ship probably, feeling her way blind in the harbor. All about, the marooned boats nudged out of the fog, scattered and bizarre, a nightmare navy stranded by the tides.

"Has the chief got a gun?" Bridge had to know.

"Course."

"Sorry I asked. You better find us the ladder—fast."

The old man cackled like a hen.

"Won't do no good. He's the law. Can't get away. Catch us

tomorrow or the day after."

"Then why are you running from him?"

"Hell! Lots different for me."

"Why?"

The chief's voice broke in, roaring suddenly out of the fog: "*Lovlo!*"

Bridge jumped, and rushed Lovlo aft. The old man laughed all the way like a schoolgirl. They went up a companionway and along a deck. The deck ended. There was a door.

"Where does this lead?" Bridge asked.

"*Lovlo!*" boomed the chief.

"Stateroom. It's haunted though." A wild laugh.

Bridge pushed through the door, dragging Lovlo after him. The room was dark and close. Lovlo's aroma in the confined space was almost too much to bear. The old man cackled merrily.

"I hear you laughing," said the chief. It might have been hide and seek.

Bridge shook the old man. "Be quiet."

The chief's voice was louder. "You're down here, Lovlo, aren't you? In this room?" There was a fumbling at the door, a click. Bridge could sense the chief standing in the doorway.

Bridge held Lovlo behind his own body, forcing him back, back. The smell was now almost too much to bear. He shook

the belaying pin at the chief's shadow. "Stay back. I'll use this thing if I have to!"

"Picasso! I knew you had something to do with this."

The room was suddenly washed in light. The chief stood there with his hand on the switch.

He smiled, then frowned. He paled. He pulled at his ear, his nose, found nothing that pleased him, and dropped his hand. He said, as though it had just occurred to him and didn't matter much anyway, "You're obstructing the law, son."

"A law that beats up helpless old men?" Bridge moved back.

"Helpless?" The chief laughed cruelly. "You sure of that?"

Climb the ladder, Rosie, Bridge pleaded in his mind. He backed away with the giggling Lovlo; the smell was incredible now; he felt his gorge rising.

"Look behind you, son," said the chief.

"Oh sure. So you can shoot me."

"I can shoot you anyway."

That was certainly true. Bridge tossed a quick glance over his shoulder. He gasped. He dropped the belaying pin, let go of Lovlo, fell back against a bulkhead.

"No!"

Mrs. Sanforth was seated at a table with a sweaty, terrifying grin on her face.

And not only her. Mr. Sanforth, too, with a woody look, eyes glazed and open. And four, five, six others in summer tops and tennis shoes and terrible, clammy expressions of cheer. Behind them a walk-in freezer door filled the wall.

"Nice folks, huh?" said Lovlo, grinning with pride.

"You mean . . ." Bridge couldn't find the words. It was too horrible to contemplate.

"He killed them," said the chief, nodding. "And he's been storing them up in that freezer of his."

Bridge forced himself to look again at Mrs. Sanforth. He was suddenly gripped by several emotions at once: horror, anger, despair . . . He turned to Lovlo. "You . . . really did?"

The old eyes twinkled proudly.

With a roar of rage and anguish, something took over Bridge, threw all his force into a fist aimed to stop and obliterate that stupid grin. At the same moment he saw Rosie in the doorway behind the chief bringing her flashlight glinting down, down at the back of the chief's grey head.

"No!" Bridge yelled.

Lovlo chuckled happily as they locked him in a cabin. They found the mayor trussed in a cupboard and

dragged him out. He took one glance into the stateroom and fell back pale, trembling, blotting his forehead with his tie.

"I had no idea, no idea," he muttered. "There were missing people, yes. But I thought he was just taking advantage of it, threatening publicity out of spite—to me, to the town. I can't imagine what he hoped . . ."

The tie was silk and did not absorb well; red dye had come off on his face to make it mottled and wild.

"I'll tell you what the lunatic intended to do," the chief growled. He had been rubbing the back of his head and sneaking respectful glances at Rosie.

"Tonight, at high tide, a bit of fog, an offshore current, he was going to set the *Celeste* adrift. Think of it: a one hundred foot vessel, loaded with stiffs in shorts and sun hats, runs aground on one of our few remaining beaches, with the mayor of the town lashed to the wheel. What the national press wouldn't do with a story like that!"

"But he couldn't know where the *Celeste* would wind up," argued Bridge.

"It didn't matter. Anywhere along our shore would do. The first report would draw newsmen like flies to a hanging."

"He couldn't have hoped to get away with it. Any of the locals would recognize the *Celeste*."

"He didn't care. He could have lit out before the *Celeste* ran aground, but that didn't matter. As long as he killed Chebucto dead, dead, dead."

Bridge looked at Rosie. "That explains the Refex carton. Lovlo needed freon to repair the freezer room."

"Right," said the chief. "And he needed electricity. It's why he got so mad when the mayor threatened to cut off his utilities. And maybe what set him off on his crazy plan."

"I apologize," said Bridge to the mayor.

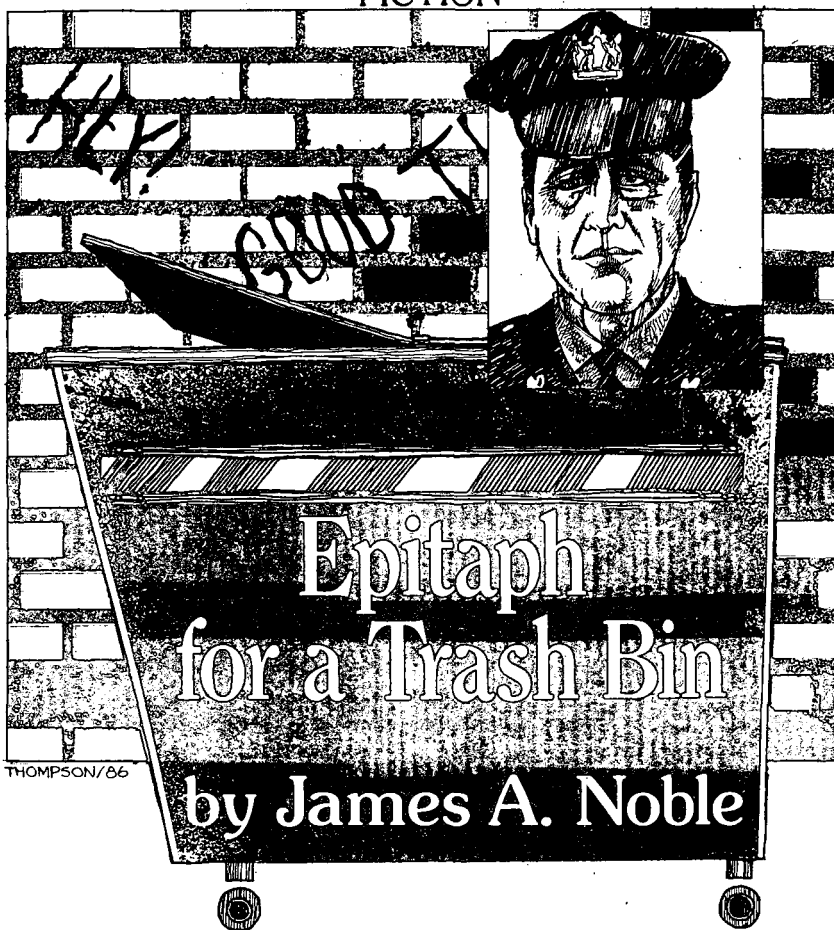
"For what?"

"Never mind—I just apologize." Bridge turned to Rosie. "Coming?" There was a drizzling rain. He preceded her down the slippery rungs of the ladder, and steadied it for her colossal and precise descent: she let herself down as a workman might lower a precious and fragile weight.

In the truck he wiped the rain out of his eyes, gripped the wheel; and said, "I feel bad, Rosie. I was wrong about everything, wasn't I?"

"Only the important things, dear," she said, patting his hand. "Only the important things."

FICTION



THOMPSON/86

WARNING:
THIS PROPERTY
GUARDED BY
ATTACK-TRAINED TRASH
BIN

I had to laugh at the crudely lettered threat recently painted on the front of that old green trash bin. It had to have been

put there by the local criminal element from the area, not a few of whom I've caught and sent up. I suppose it's their way of saying goodbye to me after nearly thirty years of working this beat. All of us, that is. They worked it for thirty years and I tried to stop them.

As I reflect back over all

those years on this, the last time I'll ever walk these streets as a city cop, I soon begin to realize the significance of the words on the side of the trash bin. Now that I think about it, "Esther" has played a major role in my career. "Esther" is the nickname I gave the old trash bin when I saw another message scratched in her side nearly three decades ago. It read, "For a real good time, call Esther," then it listed a phone number. Time has obliterated that message, but the nickname stuck.

"Esther" is situated in an alley between Norton's Liquor Store and Percy's Massage Parlor. Of course Percy's has been closed down for quite some time, so that three story building is deserted. "Esther" sits against a twelve foot high wooden fence at the rear of the liquor store.

She's one of those big green trash receptacles with small wheels and a big heavy lid. Along each side is a square sleeve by which the bin is hydraulically lifted on the front forks of a huge sanitation truck and emptied into the long trailer in the rear.

"Esther" is in pretty bad shape now. Along her left front edge the green paint is chipped where I rapped on it with my night stick every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning. Those

were the days the truck came to empty it.

Seems old Tooter would buy a pint from Norton's, get drunk, and climb into the bin to take a nap every so often. If I didn't bang on it and wake him up, he'd end up getting compressed in the back of the sanitation truck and being dumped at the city landfill. Of course, there have been times when I haven't been around to wake Tooter up and he has made that unpleasant trip.

I gave "Esther" a little push with my foot. She rolled a few feet, then stopped. I was surprised to see the wheels worked so well after all these years.

I remember the time I was chasing a young purse snatcher about twenty-five years ago. The kid had quite a lead on me, so I never really expected to catch up with him. I saw him head down the alley.

By the time I rounded the corner of the massage parlor, the snatcher was hanging from the tall fence by his shirt, just waiting for me to arrest him. "Esther" was in the middle of the alley looking innocent of any wrongdoing.

Apparently the kid had jumped on the top of the bin so he could boost himself over the fence. Unfortunately, when he tried to push off, "Esther" rolled away and left him hanging.

The kid just hung there, his arms folded and a look of disgust on his face. I'll never forget what he said to me as I walked over to free him. He said, "Did you ever have one of *those* days?"

He managed a kick at "Esther" before I cuffed him. Broke his foot. I had to take him to the hospital before I turned him in downtown.

I suppose the biggest scar on the old bin is the one put there by Percy the Pimp's convertible, a long dent that runs her entire length.

We were in the process of raiding Percy's Massage Parlor for running a prostitution ring. Percy slipped out the back door during the raid and took off up the alley in that big fancy white convertible of his. Unfortunately, "Esther" was out in the middle of the alley and Percy's car collided with her. The next thing you know, Percy is pushing the bin up the alley at forty per. And guess who pops up from inside the bin? Tooter.

If you think he was scared, you should have seen Murphy, the sanitation truck driver, as he turned into the alley to empty "Esther" that morning.

Percy's car was pretty much hidden by the length of "Esther" so Murphy must have thought he was living his worst nightmare when he saw Tooter at the helm of a high-speed,

runaway trash bin on a collision course with his truck.

At the last possible moment, "Esther" slipped off the front bumper of the convertible and one of the front forks of the truck impaled the grill of the car. The impact sent Murphy against the hydraulic lift control and the big truck unceremoniously picked up the car and dumped Percy into the trash trailer. By the time we opened the double doors at the rear and pushed Percy out, he looked more like a chef's salad than a pimp.

As for Tooter, it was nearly three months before he went back to taking naps in the bin.

I can remember that incident as if it happened yesterday, yet it was nearly twenty years ago. But the one event I will never forget happened just five years later. It was the day "Esther" saved my life.

I was chasing an armed robber on foot. He had just knocked over Norton's Liquor and had headed down the alley. I rounded the corner, never thinking he would be lying in ambush for me.

As I passed "Esther," I heard her lid bang open. I whirled around to see the robber standing in the bin, his twelve gauge shotgun pointed directly at me. The guy had me cold. I was dead meat.

That's when I saw the heavy lid coming back down. I knew it was going to be real painful. Even I had to grit my teeth as it made contact with his noggin.

Dazed, the guy fell back into the trash as his shotgun discharged. That blew a hole in the lid and banged it open again. The poor guy staggered to his feet to try to get another shot off just in time to take a second blow to the head as the lid fell once more. He was out cold for nearly two hours.

Now I took time to lift the heavy lid and look at the old hole put in it so many years ago. Besides the hole, the lid is pretty much caved in. That happened only a few short years ago when I was chasing a drug pusher across the rooftops.

We were running along the roof of the massage parlor overlooking the alley when I saw the doper getting ready to jump from the three story building into the trash bin. The lid had been left open and it was filled with several big plastic bags of trash. Remembering how the lid was always on the verge of falling shut, I threw my night stick at it. I scored a direct hit.

The lid dropped shut just as the doper leaped. He kept screaming "No, no!" all the way down as if that would change the inevitable.

Needless to say, I took my time descending the stairs to the alley to make the arrest. No need to hurry. I knew the doper wasn't going anywhere.

Now, after thirty years of pounding this beat, I would retire and "Esther" would probably go on collecting the "trash" from this neighborhood for the next cop who came to take my place.

"'Esther', you're the best partner I've ever had," I mumbled as I turned and walked out of the alley.

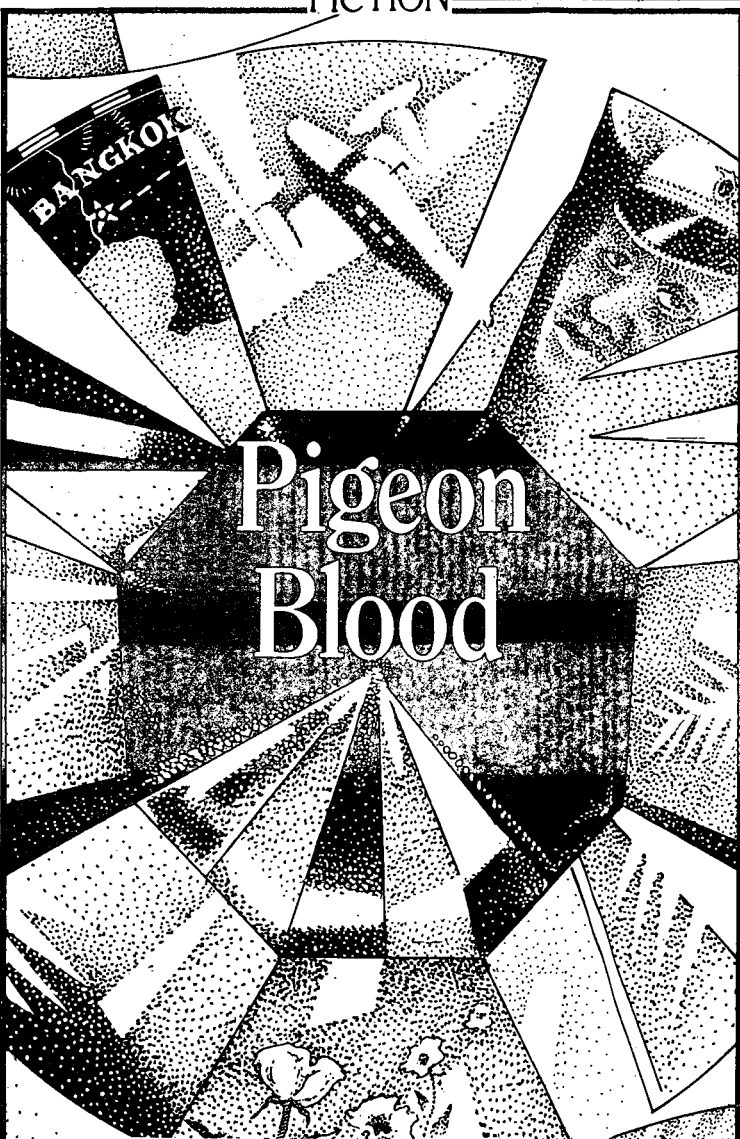
I'd barely gotten to the street when I saw Murphy drive into the alley in a truck that had a shiny new trash container riding on forks behind the cab. I watched as he skillfully maneuvered the drop-off of the new bin and the pick-up of "Esther." Apparently she was retiring today also.

I continued to watch as Murphy drove back out to the street and disappeared around a corner with "Esther"; then I walked back down the alley to the new trash bin. I banged on the left edge of it with my night stick even though I knew Tooter could hardly be inside.

Big chips of paint flaked off. The new bin had a cheap, tinny sound to it. I turned and walked away.

"You won't last five years, rookie!" I shouted back.

FICTION



by Gary Alexander

If the Kingdom of Luong existed, it would be mentioned in various almanacs and books of fact. Since Luong is, in this fiction, a small, obscure land, mention would be brief. Imagine it on, say, page 581, shoehorned between the Principality of Liechtenstein and the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, in a format as follows:

POPULATION: 1,485,000 (1985 est.). MAJOR CITIES: Hickorn (capital) 209,000; Obon 53,500.

GEOGRAPHY: 41,214 sq. mi., slightly smaller than and roughly the shape of Louisiana. Landlocked. River valleys and jungle in the southern Hickorn district, mountainous terrain in the northern highlands (Obon district).

GOVERNMENT: *Type*: Constitutional monarchy. *Head of State*: Prince Novisad Pakse; b. 1910; in office since 1954.

ECONOMY: Wood products, rice, corn, tobacco, opium, tin, gemstones. Minimal exports, but self-sufficient in agriculture. CURRENCY: Luongan zin (Dec. 1985): 405 = \$1(US). Per capita income (1983 est.): \$507.

COMMUNICATIONS: 3 radio stations.

LITERACY RATE: 76%.

HISTORY: Early tribes were conquered and assimilated by invaders. Luong became a French protectorate in 1889, but regained independence in 1954. Sometimes known as the Fourth Indochina, Luong avoided the warfare suffered by Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Political apathy, weakness of communist-led Luong Rouge insurgents, and the neutralist posture of Prince Pakse are the principal reasons why Luong has enjoyed peace in recent times.

The terminal building of Hickorn International Airport was a stucco affair in a style often described as French Colonial Chintz. Lettering on the front proclaimed H CKO N. Vegetation flourished in cracks in the runways. Despite this gentle shabbiness, Hickorn International was truly an international facility. But for footpaths through mountain passes and double-canopy jungle, there was no other way in or out of the Kingdom of Luong.

Bamsan Kiet, Hickorn's superintendent of police, and his adjutant, Captain Binh, drove past the terminal onto an apron leading to aircraft hangers. Their destination was a twin-engined airplane and a dozen Hickorn policemen and airport security officers milling about it. The plane was a DeHaviland Caribou registered to Luong Express. Inside it, reportedly, was the body of its owner, a murdered American named Jay Kenworthy.

"This is no way to spend a morning," said Kiet, a tall and fleshy man of middle age.

"A challenge, superintendent," Binh said eagerly. "It's been weeks since Hickorn has had a murder. And a foreigner, too! Police science is a skill that must be constantly sharpened, don't you agree?"

Kiet replied with a moan. It was much too early in the day for Binh's zeal. While Kiet was dressed in slacks, sandals, and open-collared shirt, his young adjutant wore a starched white uniform. Even his appearance was exhausting.

"Evidently Kenworthy was preparing to take off last night. Security personnel grew suspicious when the airplane didn't move. They found him just before dawn in the pilot's seat. He had been stabbed to death."

"Eight to ten hours before their curiosity was aroused? What do we know of the late Mr. Kenworthy?"

"Very little yet. He and the Caribou comprised Luong Express. He chartered freight and passengers between Hickorn and Obon, with an occasional trip to Bangkok. I checked our files at headquarters. He has never been arrested. What!"

Binh slammed on the brakes. The Citroën skidded to a halt and Binh jumped out, screaming at two officers who were placing the blanketed corpse of Jay Kenworthy onto a stretcher. "You shouldn't have moved him! You fools are ruining evidence!"

Kiet got out slowly. He had no intention of disturbing Binh's tirade. A reminder that a body had been putrifying in tropical heat for many hours would accomplish nothing but humiliation, a devastating loss of face. And more important, the unthinking policemen had spared Kiet the ordeal of viewing the late Jay Kenworthy. Luong's ranking civilian law enforcement official became ill at the sight of human carnage; it was Bamsan Kiet's deepest secret.

After Binh had properly cowed the pair, Kiet suggested they go aboard. The airplane was obviously old. Paint had peeled and the engine nacelles were streaked with oil. Its interior was spartan—canvas seats and a roller track in the aisle for cargo. Anything that could be considered a nook or cranny, including the instrument panel, had been pried apart.

"Whoever did this was looking for something small," Binh observed.

Kiet said, "What concerns me is the time they had to accomplish the murder and search."

Lon Min, Hickorn International Airport manager, awaited them

when they disembarked. He was a natty little man who favored cotton jumpsuits imported from Paris. He wore cologne and his hair was always just so. Lon Min was married to a second cousin of Prince Pakse and also carried the title of Associate Deputy Minister of Transportation.

Kiet had no quarrel with His Royal Highness's bureaucratic nepotism. Family gossip had squelched several coup d'état plots before the eggs hatched. But sometimes it went too far. He regarded Lon Min as prissy and corrupt. If it could be proved that Min's hands were sunken to the elbows in opium smuggling, Kiet would not faint with shock.

"Superintendent, this is a tragedy and a black mark on me. I am at your disposal."

"Thank you. Tell me what you can."

"Kenworthy landed from Obon at five P.M. He brought in soldiers. Some were on furlough, some were being transferred."

"Kenworthy flew military personnel?"

"He had recently been awarded a government contract. When military planes were unavailable, he handled the overflow."

"Then?"

"He filed a flight plan to Bangkok. Eight o'clock. I was off duty at that hour. If I had been here, I surely would have noticed that he hadn't left the tarmac. I surely would have investigated. I've already demoted my night supervisor."

"Surely," Kiet said. "Please, what was the purpose of Kenworthy's Bangkok trip? And why a three-hour stopover here? For a man in a probable hurry that would be an eternity."

"A shipment of rice. Refueling caused the delay. Westerners are always in a rush. They don't understand the Luongan pace."

"I did not see a single grain. Did you, captain? Nothing but Kenworthy's suitcases and duffel bags."

Binh shook his head no.

"That is what Kenworthy logged on his flight plan. One thousand kilograms of rice. What more can I say?"

Nothing, Kiet thought; you probably could, peacock, but you won't. He thanked Lon Min and conferred with Binh. "Opium is the likely cargo. Our troops in the Highlands claim to fight the Luong Rouge and the opium bandits, but in reality they grow rich on the opium trade. The narcotic is a prime source of hard foreign currency, so too many people blindfold themselves."

"But this is murder, superintendent."

"Indeed, so after you examine Kenworthy's baggage and his

home, investigate Deputy Minister Min's night employees, concentrating on those living beyond their salaries."

"And order an autopsy on Kenworthy?"

Binh had lived in the United States of America for a year, training with their District of Columbia police department. He had brought home strange ideas about efficiency and technology, a medical examiner program among them. Kiet had relented after some debate. But for the suspicion of poisoning, the condition of a given corpse was ample evidence of whether there had been foul play. From that point you interviewed people and listened to rumors and gossip, with which Hickorn was rife. Then you apprehended the killer. Simple enough? Kiet thought so.

He nodded his head reluctantly, making Jay Kenworthy the dubious procedure's next customer.

Kiet visited the United States Embassy, hoping to conduct his business with a clerk charged with passports and the comings and goings of Americans in Luong. The day had begun badly and good fortune again evaded him: somebody had informed Ambassador Smithson of the superintendent's presence and the ambassador insisted upon seeing him.

"Come in, come in, superintendent," Smithson said, smiling.

Kiet was wary of such enthusiasm and good cheer in this serious and reserved man. Smithson's avowed mission in Luong was to thwart a communist menace that did not exist. His membership in an American power clique known as Ivy League Eastern Establishment had somehow conferred on him the ability to wear three-piece pinstriped suits in Hickorn's ninety degree temperatures and ninety percent humidity without perspiring a droplet. Further, it allowed him to dress comfortably in shirtsleeves as he was now, despite an air-conditioned setting that conjured visions of polar bears. Kiet was duly intimidated.

"Look at this," Smithson said, pointing at a desktop computer. "We just installed it. State of the art. With this single system, we can administer embassy business and keep track of all our citizens in country. It's also linked to various intelligence operations. Data from satellites can be pulled up."

"Spy satellites, Mr. Ambassador? In outer space?"

"Yes. Your Ministry of Defense is excited about its potential. Henceforth, we'll be able to detect large-scale Rouge troop movements."

Splendid, Kiet thought. A magical gadget snooping above the

atmosphere in search of guerrillas who did their mischief in bands of ten or less. "I am impressed, sir. May I have a demonstration?"

"Absolutely. Anything that isn't classified, of course."

"An American named Jay Kenworthy, please."

Smithson was eerily childlike as he typed. In a moment the screen filled. "Kenworthy, Jay R.," Smithson said. "Age forty-two. Divorced. Former U.S. Army captain. Two tours of duty in Vietnam. Discharged in Saigon. Moved to Australia. Purchased a military surplus Caribou aircraft in Thailand and relocated to Luong several years ago."

"No disrespect intended, Mr. Ambassador, but your dossier is sketchy."

"There is more, superintendent. In code."

"Code?"

"Information not meant for general dissemination. It doesn't affect national security, however, so I see no harm. Kenworthy has had recent financial trouble. His flight business hasn't gone well. The firm financing the plane was planning to repossess it. And we have received complaints of overdue bills from Hickorn creditors. Mr. Kenworthy, so it appears, overextended himself. Why do you—"

The computer screen went blank. Ambassador Smithson punched keyboard buttons, punched them hard.

The screen remained blank. "I don't understand this, superintendent."

Kiet did understand. His sole knowledge of computers was that Hickorn's erratic electrical output disabled them fast. Gifts of the devices to his police department from the French and the Soviets moldered in storage, dead as Kiet's ancestors. American technological fallibility delighted him. "A temporary malfunction, I'm sure," he said.

Smithson punched more buttons, cuffed the side of the monitor, then gave up.

"Yes, temporary. Why, superintendent, did you inquire about Kenworthy?"

"He was murdered last night. We have few details and the killer has not been apprehended. I will notify you, naturally, of subsequent developments."

Smithson blanched. Kiet rose before the ambassador could reply and ended the visit with a farewell that seemed as popular to Americans as tomato catsup on their food. "Have a nice day, sir."

Binh was gone when Kiet returned to headquarters, presumably on the assignments Kiet had given him at the airport. There was a message from Dr. Pho, a pathologist who owned a mortuary.

Kiet groaned. Dr. Pho was Hickorn's medical examiner. In Binh's absence, Kiet would be expected to call on him for the results of Jay Kenworthy's autopsy.

Kiet went to the mortuary, an appropriately somber building on the corner of Avenue Che Guevara and Richard Nixon Boulevard. An important plank in Prince Pakse's neutralism was the naming and renaming of Hickorn's streets in honor of distinguished foreigners. Kiet enjoyed intersections like this, the figurative collision of a Cuban martyr and an American who gained prominence with a bucket of red paint and a wide brush.

But when Kiet opened the timbered doors of Blessed Sleep, his mind was not on political irony. He was hoping upon hope that Pho was not the sort of prideful craftsman who would insist on a demonstration of his skills. A verbal summary would suffice, thank you.

Dr. Pho greeted him in the anteroom. He was an older gentleman, lean and graying. He wore a white smock decorated with unpleasant stains. In his hand was a small envelope.

"Superintendent, I did not expect anyone so promptly."

"This is a murder investigation, doctor. What do you have for us, please?"

"Nobody should pass on as Mr. Kenworthy did. Stab wounds were numerous. His torso had random bruises. The attack was not initially designed to kill."

"Torture to gain information?"

"I believe so. I *know* so, superintendent. If you would care to examine the deceased."

Dr. Pho moved toward an inner door. Kiet, frozen in place, said, "After an autopsy has been accomplished by a pathologist with your credentials? No, that is not necessary. If you say torture, I accept torture."

"It isn't only tissue evidence, superintendent. Excuse me for entering your realm, but these influenced my conclusion."

Dr. Pho tore the flap on the small envelope and poured into Kiet's hand three red stones. They were transparent and faceted, each the size of a toenail.

"Magnificent color! Are they rubies?"

Dr. Pho shrugged. "I am a physician. I can identify kidney stones, but I am ignorant of gemstones."

"Where did you mine these, please?"

"In Mr. Kenworthy's lower intestine."

"How long before his death did he swallow them?"

"Ten to twelve hours."

Before he departed Obon yesterday or perhaps enroute. A treacherous and fatal snack. Kiet's opium theory was repudiated, his resistance to forensic medicine shown to be old fashioned and silly. How young Captain Binh would love to be here now!

Kiet took the stones from Dr. Pho, instructed him in the interest of justice to forget their existence, and headed downtown.

Prince Pakse loved pocket billiards. Bamsan Kiet could not imagine loving a woman as much as His Royal Highness loved the game. He had named a street Avenue Irving Crane, in honor of his favorite player.

Avenue Irving Crane ran east to west in the heart of Hickorn, from the International District, a posh residential enclave for foreigners, to the docks of the Ma San River. Its shops and cafes catered to westerners and affluent Luongans. Many of the merchants were Indian and Chinese. The engines of our economy, Kiet thought wryly as he swerved the Citroën into the only vacant parking space in sight. Our Asian brothers teach us the art of commerce and are kind enough to control it for us.

He entered Bombay Tailors and was treated to the nervous smile of its proprietor, Mr. Singh. "Superintendent, it has been too long. How may I be of service?"

"A suit of clothing today? I think not. I cannot afford your prices."

"Ah, but a discount to one who protects us from hooligans is a fair reward for dedication to duty."

"Please recall that I refused your last bribe, too, Mr. Singh. May we have privacy?"

Singh led Kiet behind a curtain. Kiet poured the red stones onto a table. "Rubies?"

Singh picked them up one by one and studied them. Kiet studied Singh. By the second stone, Singh's hand was beginning to tremble. "Superintendent, I am a humble tailor, not a jeweler. I think they are rubies, but I may be wrong. They have a synthetic tinge to them. You are my good friend, though. I am willing to pay you—"

"Not for sale," Kiet interrupted. "This is evidence, not a dowry. Please give me your opinion on their origin and value."

"I am honored that you deem me qualified, but—"

"But," Kiet interrupted again, "you are a nominal tailor. Your true business is moneychanging. Four hundred of our impotent Luongan zin equal one U.S. dollar. That is the official rate at banks and embassies. You trade our zin at five hundred to one and still make a nice profit. Black market money dealing is illegal."

"Superintendent, the practice is condoned! It brings hard currency into our humble economy. Have you never changed your zin on the street?"

"Never," Kiet lied. "I am considering a crackdown, starting with you. The law is the law. Speak to me, please, of trends. The quantity of money that passes through your shop qualifies you as Hickorn's leading economist."

"Very well. I am certain these stones are pigeon blood rubies. They are so named for their glorious color. They are found only in the Mogok Valley of upper Burma, and are the most precious jewels on earth, worth more than the finest diamonds. These are easily five carats each. Socialist generals run Burma and the ruby trade is nationalized. Consequently, the majority of the stones are made available by private entrepreneurs."

"Smugglers who desire more than wages paid in a socialist paradise to mine and cut the gems?"

"These rubies were faceted in the jungle. The normal route had been through Thailand, but I have heard that the tariffs imposed by outlaws and officials of both nations who happened upon the smugglers were becoming too costly."

"So now they enter Luong at her northern frontier? Confrontations would be fewer. If you knew the terrain, you could reach Obon without passing a soul."

"It is merely a rumor, superintendent. These are the first pigeon bloods I have seen. If, as also rumored, they are flown here to Hickorn, then on to gem brokers in Bangkok, I have no personal knowledge. Honestly."

"Mr. Singh, do you have a customer named Jay Kenworthy?"

Singh said nothing.

"If you have ever sold him a suit of clothes, it may be at this very moment fitted to his embalmed corpse."

"I was informed of his death and it saddens me."

"Hickorn gossip travels at the speed of light. I assume you also know the cause of death. Unless I get to the bottom of this quickly, Singh, the ailment that afflicted Mr. Kenworthy may prove contagious to his associates."

"In the past two weeks, superintendent, Kenworthy changed over twenty five million zin into dollars," Singh said, all of him now trembling.

"Fifty thousand. A comfortable sum. Would you speculate that the man was planning an extended trip?"

"I did not ask, superintendent. I am discreet."

"As you will be concerning our conversation, will you not?"

The tailor's ashen stare was sufficient reply.

Bamsan Kiet did not enjoy flying, especially the next morning on Royal Air Luong's Hickorn-Obon shuttle, a DC-3 whose manufacture coincided with his birth. Passengers occupied every seat, baggage nestled on their laps. Lashed down in the aisle was cargo ranging from caged chickens to truck carburetors. The side door had been permanently removed to facilitate loading and unloading. The breeze was not refreshing.

Hickorn's superintendent of police was the flight's most important passenger. Out of respect he had been assigned a forward window seat. Whenever an attendant passed, Kiet beamed approval and pretended to drink in the view. Actually his eyes were shut. Loss of face was involved here, his in particular if he lost control of his queasiness.

He knew what was below anyway. A lush emerald green scratched by a winding gray ribbon. The Hickorn-Obon Highway could not be traveled except in a convoy because of the pesky Rouge and their damned sniping and land mines.

After a long, long hour, the airliner thumped onto gravel and rough sod and taxied to the Obon terminal. Kiet subscribed to *National Geographic*. The structure reminded him of a barn in an article on an American grain province named Nebraska.

A Jeep and two burly army captains stood at the ramp. Affixed to the Jeep's front bumper was a placard, a silver star in a red background. The bearer of the general's star remained in the back seat, gazing at who knows what through mirrored sunglasses.

Kiet disembarked on wobbly legs, walked by the hard-eyed junior officers and shook hands with Brigadier General Chi Heng, commander of the Second Military District.

"Kiet, how nice to see somebody from Hickorn. I received your message and rejoiced. Life in the Highlands is lonely and austere. If my mission wasn't so vital, I would lobby His Royal Highness for reassignment to the soft duty of the capital."

Austere, Kiet thought? Chi Heng was as round as he was tall.

He had the scruffy, oily look of the opium bandits he was charged to combat, and was every bit as dangerous. All he lacked was chin whiskers and bandoliers.

"I am grateful for your time, sir," Kiet said, measuring his words carefully. He outlined the Kenworthy murder, withholding the discovery of the pigeon blood rubies.

"Terrible," Chi Heng said, shaking his head sadly. "I knew Kenworthy. For a westerner, he was not a bad man. He did charter flying for us, you know."

"Did you see him yesterday, sir?"

"I don't recall. My troops and I can barely hold the opium monsters and the communists at bay, let alone keep track of a mercenary pilot. You are not interrogating me, are you, Kiet?"

Collaboration with the opium monsters and indifference toward the guerrillas is more accurate, Kiet thought. He said, "Oh no, general! Absolutely not. I have the utmost respect for your intelligence gathering capabilities, sir, and hoped that perhaps you had chanced upon information useful in my murder case."

"I have not, but I shall investigate. I am told that Kenworthy's plane was thoroughly searched. Though I have no knowledge of his being involved in opium, I must guess he was. Kenworthy disappoints me. I did not believe him to be a criminal. Look, Kiet. Your airplane is preparing for its return to Hickorn. Is there anything further?"

Kiet was being dismissed. This was no surprise. Heng's insistence that they meet on the apron was an ample clue that there would be no long-term hospitality. "No, sir."

"Inform me of developments, will you?"

"Yes, sir. Oh, just one more thought, sir," Kiet said, looking at the captains. "I wonder if Kenworthy might have been smuggling something other than opium. And if so, why has our search revealed nothing?"

"Have a pleasurable flight, Kiet." General Chi Heng said, forcing a smile.

Captain Binh had a suspect in custody, a sullen young fellow seated stiffly in the interrogation room. Dangling over him was a bare light, the brightest incandescent bulb sold in Hickorn. This was another innovation Binh brought from his police training in America. In Kiet's view it did nothing but challenge headquarters' antique fuse box.

"His name is Plaset Curj superintendent," Binh said happily.

"A customs supervisor at Hickorn International. Look how he is dressed."

"Italian shoes," Kiet noticed out loud. "Is that a silk shirt, Mr. Curj?"

Plaset Curj studied manicured fingernails. He was in his twenties, handsome and longhaired. A dandy, Kiet thought. Lon Min's protégé.

"He has a new Honda motorbike, too. And he has been seen entertaining lady friends on the *terrasse* of the Hickorn Continental, eating fried shrimp and drinking cognac."

"Ah, freshwater shrimp from our Ma San River is surely the finest in the world. And cognac? I can afford only Golden Tiger beer with the delicacy. Foreigners call it amber death, but it is smooth and cheap."

"*French* cognac. On a salary of eighteen thousand zin a month."

"The equivalent of forty-five dollars. I envy your budgeting skills, Mr. Curj. Has he relieved his conscience yet?"

"No, superintendent. He just sits like a stone."

"Please leave us alone for a few moments, captain."

There was a trace of a pout in Binh's expression, but he obeyed. Kiet said, "Mr. Curj, were you on duty last night?"

"I don't have to say anything to you unless my lawyer is present," Plaset Curj blurted.

Kiet groaned. Binh had been at it again, reading to suspects from a little card he carried in his wallet, something important to his District of Columbia police department mentors called a Miranda card.

"Listen, Curj, you are the victim of a misunderstanding. You do *not* have the right to remain silent. As far as I am concerned, silence is admission of guilt. If you retain this silly notion, I will report it to your judge."

"My judge?"

"At your trial. You are implicated in a murder. If the killers are not brought to justice, you will stand before your peers alone, be found guilty of conspiracy, and shot," Kiet bluffed. "Wake up, Curj! This is Luong, not the United Nations."

"But am I not entitled to a lawyer?" Curj asked in a whisper.

"I will appoint you one if I am so inclined. It should not be necessary. You are a few words from being a free man. Tell me, did you see Mr. Kenworthy after his arrival from Obon yesterday?"

Curj hesitated, then said, "He had flown soldiers in. I approved his manifest for a hop to Bangkok."

"Ah, the phantom thousand kilos of rice."

"The rice was a fabrication, a purpose for the Bangkok flight. I had instructions."

"From whom, please?"

"I have already been demoted," Curj said. "If I say more, my job is jeopardized."

"You are the scapegoat of Lon Min, airport manager and Associate Deputy Minister of Transportation?"

Plaset Curj nodded.

"What, please, is the source of your additional income? Feel free to elaborate, Mr. Curj. I seek vicious killers. I am not concerned with ingrained corruption."

"My inspection of selected baggage is incomplete."

"In your haste you occasionally overlook questionable personal belongings? Pliable grayish substances, for instance?"

"Yes, superintendent. Opium gum."

"And what other forms of contraband, please?"

"None."

The denial seemed genuine. "Did you see any activity at Kenworthy's plane in the interim between his landing from Obon and the discovery of his body?"

"Truly, superintendent, no! It was a slow night. Minister Min had me in the office doing paperwork."

"While he covered the terminal floor?"

"Yes."

While Lon Min was allegedly off duty, Kiet thought. "You may go shortly. One final question. What were the ranks of the soldiers Kenworthy ferried in from Obon?"

"Mostly enlisted men. Two officers."

"Captains, perchance?"

"How did you know? Yes. General Heng's aides-de-camp. Thugs. They frighten me."

"A sensible reaction. Go."

"What should I say to Minister Min, superintendent? He will ask about my arrest."

"Anything you like. Go. Take the rear door."

Kiet summoned Binh. "Superintendent, where is —"

"Thanks to your softening, Curj spoke to me. It is like one who tries to unscrew a jar. He tries and tries, but cannot. He passes it to a second party who opens it easily because of the tension applied by the first party." Face-saving accomplished, Kiet related his interview with Curj.

"I'm not surprised. I agree with your decision to release him. He'll chatter to Lon Min and hopefully panic him in some manner."

"Hopefully."

"With your permission, we'll establish a twenty-four hour surveillance on Min."

"Splendid."

"The system used in Washington, D.C., was effective, but it required a minimum of five cars and ten men."

Kiet did not care to listen to the complex strategy. It would be the germ of a thunderous headache. "Begin and report to me on regular intervals."

"Around the clock, superintendent?"

"Not while I am asleep, please."

"But what if it is urgent?"

"I consider the shifting of the planet's axis as urgent. Use your good judgment, captain."

Three days of trailing Lon Min led to nothing.

"His daily routine is harmless, superintendent," Binh said glumly. "He does his job and lives well in his free time. You should see his villa. He drives a Mercedes, too. I'm sure our surveillance hasn't been detected. I don't know what to do next."

"His lavish lifestyle is no secret. He hasn't tried to enter Kenworthy's apartment, has he?"

"No, and when we searched it before, we had the feeling it had already been gently tossed. Still, I even withdrew the patrols in the neighborhood to give him the opportunity. The apartment contained only furniture, and there were no clues in Kenworthy's belongings on the plane, either. I suppose he mailed his money ahead."

"Discouraging," Kiet said.

"If we are correct in presuming Min's knowledge of the rubies, would he not attempt to find them?"

"The temptation must be fierce," Kiet agreed. "As it must be to the other principals. They are cautious. They will wait."

"It could take weeks or months or even years, superintendent!"

"I, however, am impatient," Kiet said, glancing at his watch. "In half an hour it will be sundown. Please change into a fatigue uniform and accompany me on a small mission of a criminal nature."

"Sir?"

"Breaking and entering, captain. A residential burglary."

Jay Kenworthy's apartment building was modest compared to International District villas, but by ordinary Hickorn standards nonetheless substantial—an upper wing on three stories of stucco, a partial view of downtown and the Ma San River.

"My police seal hasn't been tampered with," Binh said.

"Tamper, please. Kick the door in."

"But I have a key."

"Oh, stand aside." On the fourth try, the sash splintered and the door yielded.

"Are you all right, superintendent?"

Kiet limped inside. "Certainly. Tip over that sofa while I ransack the refrigerator."

"We're making an awful lot of noise."

"Splendid. Make more."

In five minutes they were breathing heavily. Kiet was seeing spots, and his limbs were nearly numb.

"In a sense, this is exhilarating," said a grinning Captain Binh. "The neighbors will be phoning the police."

"As concerned citizens, they should be. If Hickorn's telephone system is behaving at normal efficiency, they might contact our switchboard in under thirty minutes. Come."

They ran downstairs and got into Kiet's unmarked Renault, Binh behind the wheel. "Curtains are parting," Kiet said. "Splendid. Full power, please."

Binh accelerated around the corner, skidding. Kiet was thrown against his door.

"I don't know why we're doing this, but it's more fun than I've had in ages," said the gleeful Binh. "Where to?"

Kiet dug in the glove compartment for search warrant forms. Luongan law granted senior police officials that authority. "To Bombay Tailors. Slow down, please, so I can write. The desired effect of escaping burglars has been accomplished. I do not care to die enroute."

"What do you expect to find at Singh's, superintendent?"

"No rubies, no physical evidence in the Kenworthy slaying. On that I would wager a month's salary. Our reward will be a disreputable tailor quavering while we dismantle his shop."

"I'm not complaining, superintendent. The man is slimy, but is there a specific purpose to harassing him?"

"A segment in my devious trilogy, captain. The middle segment, sandwiched between our vandalism and our subsequent interview with Deputy Minister Min in regard to the same."

The preoccupied Binh turned left in front of a taxicab. Binh and the taxi swerved. The taxi bounded over a curb onto a sidewalk and smashed into a fruit stand, scattering mangos and pineapples as if they were bowling pins. Kiet silently thanked whatever deity was guarding the incident that no human being was killed or injured. Binh drove on obliviously, lost in deductive reasoning. "Aha! We are baiting a trap."

"Indeed," Kiet replied. "Divert your Lon Min surveillance team to the airport. Hickorn's gossip cannot fail us."

"Cunning, superintendent," said Prince Novisad Pakse as he leaned over his billiards table and aimed. "Your investigation in the Kenworthy murder was resourceful and courageous."

Kiet stood off to a side, as stiffly as his soft bulk would permit. "Thank you, Your Highness."

"You flushed the rascals in what—a single day?"

"A day and an afternoon," Kiet said modestly. "General Heng's two brutes were obsessed with mayhem when they disembarked from Obon. On my visit to Heng, I planted the suspicion that the captains betrayed him. They desperately needed to redeem themselves. It was child's play to follow the captains to Deputy Minister Min's home."

"Former Minister Min," Prince Pakse said. He struck the cue ball with finesse. It rolled interminably toward the ten-ball and nudged it into a corner pocket. "Their expectation, of course, was the missing rubies."

"In the American vernacular, Your Highness, Jay Kenworthy had gone for a jackpot. Along with his opium involvement, he smuggled pigeon bloods for Heng, from Obon to Hickorn to Bangkok. He was paid well, surely, though all that dirty money was inadequate, considering his debts and spending habits. He converted his zin to cash. The three rubies in his digestive system were a final bonus, the stake to a new life. Heng and his captains perhaps detected a change in his behavior. The captains learned that he had packed for an extended trip and demanded the return of the stones. Obviously, whatever explanation Kenworthy offered was not convincing."

"And you planted the suggestion that Mr. Singh was Min's conduit?"

"A rare illegal financial activity. Singh was innocent of. But a logical choice to General Heng and his ugly bookends."

"The bodyguards were on Kenworthy's last flight to Hickorn. Why did Heng not merely give them the gems to carry?"

"I surmise it was Heng's method of checks and balances. He trusted no one. Kenworthy moved the jewels. The twin cretins were ordered to make certain he did so properly."

"Former Minister Min was in need of repair when you rescued him and arrested the captains. I wonder why you were so tardy."

"If I may be candid, Your Highness, this brutal interim made him quite flexible in terms of disclosure. We told him that if he did not implicate himself, we would have no options but to release him and that General Heng has an ample supply of replacement bootlickers eager and capable of advancing their careers by any means. Former Minister Lon Min is out of the hospital and in our custody. His injuries were superficial, I am happy to say. He confirmed my feeling that his participation in the ruby smuggling was the same as with opium. Passive participation. He was generously paid to look elsewhere when a shipment came through and to assure that his staff did the same. I merely allowed the captains to believe that Min had somehow acquired the rubies."

Prince Pakse chuckled and dispatched the three-ball to a corner pocket. "I have not been blind to General Heng and his extracurricular dealings, superintendent. I perhaps tolerate more than I should in the name of political tranquility."

"I am a realist myself, Your Highness."

"Have the psychopathic captains implicated General Heng?"

"They have refused to speak to anyone, Your Highness. That aspect may be difficult. Our case against everyone involved depends on testimony from everyone else, all of whom have the character of rabid hyenas. General Heng's conviction is not guaranteed, I fear."

Prince Pakse shot the thirteen-ball at an opposite corner. It did not go in. "Too much green," he said. "I had an inkling of such a problem. General Heng is an individual most deserving of punishment, don't you agree?"

"I do, Your Highness."

"For that reason I have promoted him to major general."

Kiet tried to respond, but could not.

"He continually whines about the isolation of Obon and the Highlands, of his dedication to eradicating the Rouge and the opium gangsters, does he not?"

"He does, Your Highness."

"I am rewarding him for his service. His promotion brings him

to his beloved Hickorn, as commandant of the Royal Military Academy."

Kiet laughed. The academy was on the outskirts of town, on the jungle side of the Ma San River. Officer candidates and enlisted recruits alike were trained there. The environment was harsh, the schedule sixteen hours per day minimum.

"I could exile him, superintendent, but what retribution is that? I would be allowing easier license to utilize his Swiss bank accounts. The academy's regimen will boil excess kilograms from his flabby body. After his five-year tour of duty, he will be a new man, fit and lean. Am I being too kind, superintendent?"

Kiet answered with a broad smile.

Prince Pakse shot at the thirteen-ball again. This time he did not miss.

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

Mr. Macduff played the part rehearsed by Mr. Macbeth.

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LAURA GUTH

CIRCULATION DIRECTOR, SUBSCRIPTIONS

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

In Vino Veritas

by A. A. Milne



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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I am in a terrible predicament, as you will see directly. I don't know what to do. . . .

"One of the maxims which I have found most helpful in my career," the superintendent was saying, "apart, of course, from employing a good press agent, has been the simple one that appearances are not always deceptive. A crime may be committed exactly as it seems to have been committed, and exactly as it was intended to be committed." He helped himself and passed the bottle.

"I don't think I follow you," I said, hoping thus to lead him on.

I am a writer of detective stories. If you have never heard of me, it can only be because you don't read detective stories. I wrote *Murder on the Back Stairs* and *The Mystery of the Twisted Eglantine*, to mention only two of my successes. It was this fact, I think, which first interested Superintendent Frederick Mortimer in me, and, of course, me in him. He is a big fellow with the face of a Roman emperor; I am rather the small neat type. We gradually became friends, and so got into the habit of dining together once a month, each in turn being host in his own flat. He liked talking about his cases and naturally I liked listening. I may say now that *Blood on the Eiderdown* was suggested to me by an experience of his at Crouch End. He also liked putting me right when I made mistakes, as so many of us do, over such technical matters as fingerprints and Scotland Yard procedure. I had always supposed, for instance, that you could get good fingerprints from butter. This, apparently, is not the case. From buttery fingers on other objects, yes, but not from the pat of butter itself, or, anyhow, not in hot weather. This, of course, was a foolish mistake of mine, as in any case Lady Sybil would not have handled the butter directly in this way, as my detective should have seen. My detective, by the way, is called Sherman Flagg, and is pretty well known by now. Not that this is germane to my present story.

"I don't think I follow you," I said.

"I mean that the simple way of committing a murder is often the best way. This doesn't mean that the murderer is a man of simple mind. On the contrary. He is subtle enough to know that the simple solution is too simple to be credible."

This sounded anything but simple, so I said, "Give me an example."

"Well, take the case of the magnum of Tokay which was sent to the Marquis of Hedingham on his lordship's birthday. Have I never told you about it?"

"Never," I said, and I too helped myself and passed the bottle.

He filled his glass and considered. "Give me a moment to get it clear," he said. "It was a long time ago." While he closed his eyes, and let the past drift before him, I fetched another bottle of the same; a Château Latour '78, of which I understand there is very little left in the country.

"Yes," said Mortimer, opening his eyes, "I've got it now."

I leant forward, listening eagerly. This is the story he told me.

The first we heard of it at the Yard (said Mortimer) was a brief announcement over the telephone that the Marquis of Hedingham's butler had died suddenly at his lordship's town house in Brook Street, and that poison was suspected. This was at seven o'clock. We went round at once. Inspector Totman had been put in charge of the case; I was a young detective sergeant at the time, and I generally worked under Totman. He was a brisk, military sort of fellow, with a little prickly ginger mustache, good at his job in a showy, orthodox way, but he had no imagination, and he was thinking all the time of what Inspector Totman would get out of it. Quite frankly I didn't like him. Outwardly we kept friendly, for it doesn't do to quarrel with one's superiors; indeed, he was vain enough to think that I had a great admiration for him; but I knew that he was just using me for his own advantage, and I had a shrewd suspicion that I should have been promoted before this, if he hadn't wanted to keep me under him so that he could profit by my brains.

We found the butler in his pantry, stretched out on the floor. An open bottle of Tokay, a broken wineglass with the dregs of the liquid still in it, the medical evidence of poisoning, all helped to build the story for us. The wine had arrived about an hour before, with the card of Sir William Kelso attached to it. On the card was a typewritten message, saying, "Bless you, Tommy, and here's something to celebrate it with." Apparently it was his lordship's birthday, and he was having a small family party for the occasion, of about six people. Sir William Kelso, I should explain, was his oldest friend and a relation by marriage, Lord Hedingham having married his sister; in fact, he was to have been one of the party present that evening. He was a bachelor about fifty, and a devoted uncle to his nephew and nieces.

Well, the butler had brought up the bottle and the card to his lordship—this was about six o'clock; and Lord Hedingham, as he told us, had taken the card, said something like "Good old Bill,

we'll have that tonight, Perkins," and Perkins had said, "Very good, my lord," and gone out again with the bottle, and the card had been left lying on the table. Afterwards, there could be little doubt what had happened. Perkins had opened the bottle with the intention of decanting it, but had been unable to resist the temptation to sample it first. I suspect that in his time he had sampled most of his lordship's wine, but had never before come across a Tokay of such richness. So he had poured himself out a full glass, drunk it, and died almost immediately.

"Good Heavens!" I interrupted. "But how extremely providential—I mean, of course, for Lord Hedingham and the others."

"Exactly," said the superintendent.

The contents of the bottle were analyzed (he went on) and found to contain a more than fatal dose of prussic acid. Prussic acid isn't a difficult thing to get hold of, so that didn't help much. Of course we did all the routine things, and I and young Roberts, a nice young fellow who often worked with us, went round all the chemists' shops in the neighborhood, and Totman examined everybody from Sir William and Lord Hedingham downwards, and Roberts and I took the bottle round to all the well known wine merchants, and at the end of a week all we could say was this:

1. The murderer had a motive for murdering Lord Hedingham; or, possibly, somebody at his party; or, possibly the whole party. In accordance, we learnt, with the usual custom, his lordship would be the first to taste the wine. A sip would not be fatal, and in a wine of such richness the taste might not be noticeable; so that the whole party would then presumably drink his lordship's health. He would raise his glass to them, and in this way they would all take the poison, and be affected according to how deeply they drank. On the other hand, his lordship might take a good deal more than a sip in the first place, and so be the only one to suffer. My deduction from this was that the motive was revenge rather than gain. The criminal would revenge himself on Lord Hedingham, if his lordship or *any* of his family were seriously poisoned; he could only profit if *definite* people were definitely *killed*. It took a little time to get Totman to see this, but he did eventually agree.

2. The murderer had been able to obtain one of Sir William Kelso's cards, and knew that John Richard Mervyn Plantaganet Carlow, 10th Marquis of Hedingham, was called "Tommy" by his intimates. Totman deduced from this that he was therefore one of the Hedingham-Kelso circle of relations and friends. I disputed

this. I pointed out: (a) that it was rather to strangers than to intimate friends that cards were presented; except in the case of formal calls, when they were left in a bowl or tray in the hall, and anybody could steal one; (b) that the fact that Lord Hedingham was called Tommy must have appeared in society papers and be known to many people; and, most convincing of all, (c) that the murderer did *not* know that Sir William Kelso was to be in the party that night. For obviously some reference would have been made to the gift, either on his arrival or when the wine was served; whereupon he would have disclaimed any knowledge of it, and the bottle would immediately have been suspected. As it was, of course, Perkins had drunk from it before Sir William's arrival. Now both Sir William and Lord Hedingham assured us that they *always* dined together on each other's birthday, and they were convinced that any personal friend of theirs would have been aware of the fact. I made Totman question them about this, and he then came round to my opinion.

3. There was nothing to prove that the wine in the bottle corresponded to the label; and wine experts were naturally reluctant to taste it for us. All they could say from the smell was that it was a Tokay of sorts. This, of course, made it more difficult for us. In fact I may say that neither from the purchase of the wine nor the nature of the poison did we get any clue.

We had, then, the following picture of the murderer. He had a cause of grievance, legitimate or fancied, against Lord Hedingham, and did not scruple to take the most terrible revenge. He knew that Sir William Kelso was a friend of his lordship's and called him Tommy, and that he might reasonably give him a bottle of wine on his birthday. He did *not* know that Sir William would be dining there that night; that is to say, *even as late as six o'clock that evening, he did not know*. He was not likely, therefore, to be anyone at present employed or living in Lord Hedingham's house. Finally, he had had an opportunity, for what this was worth, to get hold of a card of Sir William's.

As it happened, there was somebody who fitted completely into this picture. It was a fellow called—wait a bit, Merrivale, Medley—oh well, it doesn't matter. Merton, that was it. Merton. He had been his lordship's valet for six months, had been suspected of stealing, and dismissed without a character. Just the man we wanted. So for a fortnight we searched for Merton. And then, when at last we got on to him, we discovered that he had the most

complete alibi imaginable. (*The superintendent held up his hand, and it came into my mind that he must have stopped the traffic as a young man with just that gesture.*) Yes, I know what you're going to say, what you detective-story writers always say—the better an alibi, the worse it is. Well, sometimes, I admit; but not in this case. For Merton was in jail, under another name, and he had been inside for the last two months. And what do you think he was suspected of, and now waiting trial for? Oh well, of course you guess, I've as good as told you. He was on a charge of murder—and murder, mark you, by poison.

"Good Heavens," I interjected. I seized the opportunity to refill my friend's glass. He said, "Exactly," and took a long drink. I thought fancifully that he was drinking to drown that terrible disappointment of so many years ago.

You can imagine (he went on) what a shock this was to us. You see, a certain sort of murder had been committed; we had deduced that it was done by a certain man without knowing whether he was in the least capable of such a crime; and now, having proved to the hilt that he was capable of it, we had simultaneously proved that he didn't do it. We had proved ourselves right—and our case mud.

I said to Totman, "Let's take a couple of days off, and each of us think it out, and then pool our ideas and start afresh."

Totman frisked up his little mustache, and laughed in his conceited way.

"You don't think I'm going to admit myself wrong, do you, when I've just proved I'm right?" Totman saying "I," when he had got everything from me! "Merton's my man. He'd got the bottle ready, and somebody else delivered it for him. That's all. He had to wait for the birthday, you see, and when he found himself in prison, his wife or somebody—"

"—took round the bottle, all nicely marked 'Poison; not to be delivered till Christmas Day.' " I had to say it, I was so annoyed with him.

"Don't be more of a damned fool than you can help," he shouted, "and don't be insolent, or you'll get into trouble."

I apologized humbly, and told him how much I liked working with him. He forgave me—and we were friends again. He patted me on the shoulder.

"You take a day off," he said kindly, "you've been working too hard. Take a bus into the country and make up a good story for

me; the story of that bottle, and how it came from Merton's lodging to Brook Street, and who took it and why. I admit I don't see it at present, but that's the bottle, you can bet your life. I'm going down to Leatherhead. Report here on Friday morning, and we'll see what we've got. My birthday as it happens, and I feel I'm going to be lucky." Leatherhead was where this old woman had been poisoned. That was the third time in a week he'd told me when his entirely misconceived birthday was. He was like that.

I took a bus to Hampstead Heath. I walked round the Leg of Mutton Pond twenty times. And each time that I went round, Totman's theory seemed sillier than the last time. And each time I felt more and more strongly that we were being *forced* into an entirely artificial interpretation of things. It sounds fantastic, I know, but I could almost feel the murderer behind us, pushing us along the way he wanted us to go.

I sat down on a seat, and I filled a pipe and I said, "Right! The murderer's a man who wanted me to believe all that I have believed. When I've told myself that the murderer intended to do so-and-so, he intended me to believe that, and therefore he didn't do so-and-so. When I've told myself that the murderer wanted to mislead me, he wanted me to think he wanted to mislead me, which meant that the truth was exactly as it seemed to be. Now then, Fred, you'll begin all over again, and you'll take things as they are, and won't be too clever about them. Because the murderer expects you to be clever, and wants you to be clever, and from now on you aren't going to take your orders from *him*."

And of course, the first thing which leaped to my mind was that the murderer *meant* to murder the butler!

It seemed incredible now that we could ever have missed it. Didn't every butler sample his master's wines? Why, it was an absolute certainty that Perkins would be the first victim of a poisoned bottle of a very special vintage. What butler could resist pouring himself out a glass as he decanted it?

Wait, though. Mustn't be in a hurry. Two objections. One: Perkins might be the one butler in a thousand who wasn't a wine sampler. Two: Even if he were like any other butler, he might be out of sorts on that particular evening, and have put by a glass to drink later. Wouldn't it be much too risky for a murderer who only wanted to destroy Perkins, and had no grudge against Lord Hedingham's family, to depend so absolutely on the butler drinking first?

For a little while this held me up, but not for long. Suddenly I saw the complete solution.

It would *not* be risky if (a) the murderer had certain knowledge of the butler's habits; and (b) could, if necessary, at the last moment, prevent the family from drinking. In other words, if he were an intimate of the family, were himself present at the party, and without bringing suspicion on himself, could bring the wine under suspicion.

In other words, and only, and finally, and definitely—if he were Sir William Kelso. For Sir William was the only man in the world who could say, "Don't drink this wine. I'm supposed to have sent it to you, and I didn't, so that proves it's a fake." The *only* man.

Why hadn't we suspected him from the beginning? One reason, of course, was that we had supposed the intended victim to be one of the Hedingham family, and of Sir William's devotion to his sister, brother-in-law, nephew, and nieces, there was never any doubt. But the chief reason was our assumption that the last thing a murderer would do would be to give himself away by sending his own card round with the poisoned bottle. "The *last* thing a murderer would do"—and therefore the *first* thing a really clever murderer would do. For it couldn't be explained as "the one mistake which every murderer makes"; he couldn't send his own card accidentally. "Impossible," we said, that a murderer should do it deliberately! But the correct answer was, impossible that we should not be deceived if it were done deliberately—and therefore brilliantly clever.

To make my case complete to myself, for I had little hope as yet of converting Totman, I had to establish motive. Why should Sir William want to murder Perkins? I gave myself the pleasure of having tea that afternoon with Lord Hedingham's cook-housekeeper. We had caught each other's eye on other occasions when I had been at the house, and—well, I suppose I can say it now—I had a way with the women in those days. When I left, I knew two things. Perkins had been generally unpopular, not only downstairs, but upstairs; "it was a wonder how they put up with him." And her ladyship "had been a different woman lately."

"How different?" I asked.

"So much younger, if you know what I mean, Sergeant Mortimer. Almost like a girl again, bless her heart."

I did know. And that was that. Blackmail.

What was I to do? What did my evidence amount to? Nothing. It was all corroborative evidence. If Kelso had done one suspicious

thing, or left one real clue, then the story I had made up would have convinced any jury. As it was, in the eyes of a jury he had done one completely unsuspecting thing, and left one real clue to his innocence—his visiting card. Totman would just laugh at me.

I disliked the thought of being laughed at by Totman. I wondered how I could get the laugh of him. I took a bus to Baker Street, and walked into Regent's Park, not minding where I was going, but just thinking. And then, as I got opposite Hanover Terrace, who should I see but young Roberts.

"Hallo, young fellow, what have you been up to?"

"Hallo, sarge," he grinned. "Been calling on my old schoolchum, Sir Woppity Wotsit—or rather, his valet. Tottie thought he might have known Merton. Speaking as one valet to another, so to speak."

"Is Inspector Totman back?" I asked.

Roberts stood to attention, and said, "No, Sergeant Mortimer, Inspector Totman is not expected to return from Leatherhead, Surrey, until a late hour tonight."

You couldn't be angry with the boy. At least I couldn't. He had no respect for anybody, but he was a good lad. And he had an eye like a hawk. Saw everything and forgot none of it.

"I suppose by Sir Woppity Wotsit you mean Sir William Kelso," I said. "I didn't know he lived up this way."

Roberts pointed across the road. "Observe the august mansion. Five minutes ago you'd have found me in the basement, talking to a cockeyed churchwarden who thought Merton was in Surrey. As it is, of course."

I had a sudden crazy idea.

"Well, now you're going back there," I said. "I'm going to call on Sir William, and I want you handy. Would they let you in at the basement again, or are they sick of you?"

"Sarge, they just love me. When I went, they said, 'Must you go?'"

We say at the Yard, "Once a murderer, always a murderer." Perhaps that was why I had an absurd feeling that I should like young Roberts within call. Because I was going to tell Sir William Kelso what I'd been thinking about by the Leg of Mutton Pond. I'd only seen him once, but he gave me the idea of being the sort of man who wouldn't mind killing, but didn't like lying. I thought he would give himself away . . . and then—well, there might be a roughhouse, and young Roberts would be useful.

As we walked in at the gate together, I looked in my pocketbook

for a card. Luckily I had one left, though it wasn't very clean. Roberts, who never missed anything, said, "Personally I always use blotting paper," and went on whistling. If I hadn't known him, I shouldn't have known what he was talking about. I said, "Oh, do you?" and rang the bell. I gave the maid my card, and asked if Sir William could see me, and at the same time Roberts gave her a wink, and indicated the back door. She nodded to him, and asked me to come in. Roberts went down and waited for her at the basement. I felt safer.

Sir William was a big man, as big as I was. But of course a lot older. He said, "Well, sergeant, what can I do for you?" twiddling my card in his fingers. He seemed quite friendly about it. "Sit down, won't you?"

I said, "I think I'll stand, Sir William. I wanted just to ask you one question if I might." Yes, I know I was crazy, but somehow I felt kind of inspired.

"By all means," he said, obviously not much interested.

"When did you first discover that Perkins was blackmailing Lady Hedingham?"

He was standing in front of his big desk, and I was opposite to him. He stopped fiddling with my card, and became absolutely still; and there was a silence so complete that I could feel it in every nerve of my body. I kept my eyes on his, you may be sure. We stood there, I don't know how long.

"Is that the only question?" he asked. The thing that frightened me was that his voice was just the same as before. Ordinary.

"Well, just one more. Have you a Corona typewriter in your house?" You see, we knew that a Corona had been used, but there was nothing distinctive about it, and it might have been any one in a thousand. Just corroborative evidence again, that's all. But it told him that I knew.

He gave a long sigh, tossed the card into the wastepaper basket, and walked to the window. He stood there with his back to me, looking out but seeing nothing. Thinking. He must have stood there for a couple of minutes. Then he turned round, and to my amazement he had a friendly smile on his face. "I think we'd both better sit down," he said. We did.

"There is a Corona in the house which I sometimes use," he began. "I daresay you use one, too."

"I do."

"And so do thousands of other people—including, it may be, the murderer you are looking for."

"Thousands of people including the murderer," I agreed.

He noticed the difference, and smiled. "People" I had said, not "other people." And I didn't say I was looking for him. Because I had found him.

"So much for that. There is nothing in the actual wording of the typed message to which you would call my attention?"

"No. Except that it was exactly right."

"Oh, my dear fellow, anyone could have got it right. A simple birthday greeting."

"Anyone in your own class, Sir William, who knew you both. But that's all. It's Inspector Totman's birthday tomorrow—" (as he keeps telling us, damn him, I added to myself). "If I sent him a bottle of whisky, young Roberts—that's the constable who's in on this case, you may have seen him about, he's waiting for me now down below"—I thought this was rather a neat way of getting that in—"Roberts could make a guess at what I'd say, and so could anybody at the Yard who knows us both, and they wouldn't be far wrong. But *you* couldn't, Sir William."

He looked at me. He couldn't take his eyes off me. I wondered what he was thinking. At last he said:

"A long life and all the best, with the admiring good wishes of — — how's that?"

It was devilish. First that he had really been thinking it out, when he had so much else to think about, and then that he'd got it so right. That "admiring"; which meant that he'd studied Totman just as he was studying me, and knew how I'd play up to him.

"You see," he smiled, "it isn't really difficult. And the fact that my card was used is in itself convincing evidence of my innocence, don't you think?"

"To a jury perhaps," I said, "but not to me."

"I wish I could convince *you*," he murmured to himself. "Well, what are you doing about it?"

"I shall, of course, put my reconstruction of the case in front of Inspector Totman tomorrow."

"Ah! A nice birthday surprise for him. And, knowing your Totman, what do you think he will do?"

He had me there, and he knew it.

"I think *you* know him too, sir," I said.

"I do," he smiled.

"And me, I daresay, and anybody else you meet. Quick as lightning. But even ordinary men like me have a sort of sudden understanding of people sometimes. As I've got of you, sir. And I've a sort of feeling that, if ever we get you into a witness box, and you've taken the oath, you won't find perjury so much to your liking as murder. Or what the law calls murder."

"But *you* don't?" he said quickly.

"I think," I said, "that there are a lot of people who ought to be killed. But I'm a policeman, and what I think isn't evidence. You killed Perkins, didn't you?"

He nodded; and said, almost with a grin at me, "A nervous affection of the head, if you put it in evidence. I could get a specialist to swear to it." My God, he was a good sort of man. I was really sorry when they found him next day on the Underground. Or what was left of him. And yet what else could he do?

I was furious with Fred Mortimer. That was no way to end a story. Suddenly, like that, as if he were tired of it. I told him so.

"My dear little Cyril," he said, "it isn't the end. We're just coming to the exciting part. This will make your hair curl."

"Oh!" I said sarcastically. "Then I suppose all that you've told me so far is just introduction?"

"That's right. Now listen. On the Friday morning, before we heard of Sir William's death, I went in to report to Inspector Totman. He wasn't there. Nobody knew where he was. They rang up his block of flats. Now hold tight to the leg of the table or something. When the porter got into his flat, he found Totman's body. Poisoned."

"Good Heavens!" I ejaculated.

"You may say so. There he was, and on the table was a newly opened bottle of whisky, and by the side of it was a visiting card. And whose card do you think it was? *Mine!* And what do you think it said? 'A long life and all the best, with the admiring good wishes of—*me!* Lucky for me I had had young Roberts with me. Lucky for me he had this genius for noticing and remembering. Lucky for me he could swear to the exact shape of the smudge of ink on that card. And I might add, lucky for me that they believed me when I told them word for word what had been said at my interview with Sir William, as I have just told you. I was reprimanded, of course, for exceeding my duty, as I most certainly had, but that was only

official. Unofficially they were very pleased with me. We couldn't prove anything, naturally, and Sir William's death had looked as accidental as anything could, so we just had to leave it. But a month later I was promoted to inspector."

He filled his glass and drank, while I revolved his extraordinary story in my mind.

"The theory," I said, polishing my *pince-nez* thoughtfully, "was, I suppose, this. Sir William sent the poisoned whisky, not so much to get rid of Totman, from whom he had little to fear, as to discredit you by bringing you under suspicion, and entirely to discredit your own theory of the other murder."

"Exactly."

"And then, at the last moment he realized that he couldn't go on with it, or the weight of his crimes became suddenly too much for him, or—"

"Something of the sort. Nobody ever knew, of course."

I looked across the table with sudden excitement; almost with awe.

"Do you remember what he said to you?" I asked, giving the words their full meaning as I slowly quoted them. "The fact that my card was used is convincing evidence of my innocence.' And you said, 'Not to me.' And he said, 'I wish I could convince you.' And *that was how he did it!* The fact that your card was used *was* convincing evidence of your innocence!"

"With the other things. The proof that he was in possession of the particular card of mine which was used, and the certainty that he had committed the other murder. Once a poisoner, always a poisoner."

"True . . . yes. . . . Well, thanks very much for the story, Fred. All the same, you know," I said, shaking my head at him, "it doesn't altogether prove what you set out to prove."

"What was that?"

"That the simple explanation is generally the true one. In the case of Perkins, yes. But not in the case of Totman."

"Sorry, I don't follow."

"My dear fellow," I said, putting up a finger to emphasize my point, for he seemed a little hazy with the wine suddenly; "the *simple* explanation of Totman's death—surely?—would have been that *you* had sent him the poisoned whisky."

Superintendent Mortimer looked a little surprised.

"But I did," he said.

So now you see my terrible predicament. I could hardly listen as he went on dreamily: "I never liked Totman, and he stood in my way; but I hadn't seriously thought of getting rid of him, until I got that card into my hands again. As I told you, he dropped it into the basket, and turned to the window, and I thought, Damn it, *you* can afford to chuck about visiting cards, but I can't, and it's the only one I've got left, and if you don't want it, I do. So I bent down very naturally to do up my bootlace, and felt in the basket behind me, because of course it was rather an undignified thing to do, and I didn't want to be seen; and it was just as I was putting it into my pocket that I saw that inksmudge again, and I remembered that Roberts had seen it. And in a flash the whole plan came to me; simple; foolproof. And from that moment everything I said to him was in preparation of it. 'Course we were quite alone, but you never know who might be listening, and besides—" he twiddled the stem of his empty wineglass—"p'raps I'm like Sir William, rather tell the truth than not, and it *was* true, all of it as I told the super, how Sir William came to know about Totman's birthday, and knew that those were the very words I should have used. Made it very convincing, me just repeating to the super what had really been said. Don't think I wanted to put anything on to Sir William that wasn't his. I liked him. But he as good as told me he wasn't going to wait for what was coming to him, and he'd done one murder anyway. That was why I slipped down with the bottle that evening, and left it outside Totman's flat. Didn't dare wait till the morning, in case Sir William closed his account that night." He stood up and stretched himself. "Ah, well, it was a long time ago. Goodbye, old man, I must be off. Thanks for a grand dinner. Don't forget, you're dining with *me* next month. I've got a new cocktail for you. You'll like it."— He swaggered out, leaving me to my thoughts.

"Once a murderer, always a murderer. . . ." And tomorrow he will wake up and remember what he has told me! And I shall be the only person in the world who knows his secret! . . .

Perhaps he won't remember. Perhaps he was drunk. . . .

In vino veritas. Wasn't it the younger Pliny who said that? A profound observation. Truth in the bottle. . . .

"Once a poisoner, always a poisoner. . . ."

"I've got a new cocktail for you. You'll like it."

Yes, but—shall I?

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



PHOEBE
ATWOOD TAYLOR

Between 1931 and 1951 Phoebe Atwood Taylor wrote two dozen mysteries that featured an amateur, unpaid detective named Asey Mayo. During that time Asey had no peers among his neighbors when it came to solving crimes. That statement doesn't do justice to Asey's talents, however, as he lived on the relatively small island of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. And frankly, Asey wouldn't have had too much competition in sleuthing had he hailed even from nearby Boston, or some other more populous place.

But one can't imagine Asey Mayo living permanently anywhere "off island," and that is certainly one of his charms: Asey Mayo is a true Yankee,

born and bred, with all the traditional characteristics of the beast. He is, for instance, a man of few words, and when he does speak, he can be infuriatingly circumspect, sometimes almost to the point of unintelligibility (at least to us "foreigners" and "tourists"), though his creator has an uncanny knack for catching the dialect and taming it to the written word. Asey admires strong, spunky women (who are employed as narrators of the tales), which makes him attractive to the opposite sex in spite of his confirmed bachelor status and his indeterminate age. He, like all Yankees, prides himself on having an abundance of common sense (which he does), and appreciates such homespun virtues as thrift and

honesty in others. He is loyal to a fault, and it is this last characteristic which embroils him in his first case, aptly entitled *The Cape Cod Mystery*.

Bill Porter, a breezy young man of independent means, seems the ideal suspect in the murder of a visiting novelist, the obnoxious Dale Sanborn. But Prudence Whitsby and her niece, Betsey, know Bill Porter too well ever to believe him capable of such a deed. So does Asey Mayo, Bill's old-time friend and mentor and sort-of manservant. The police, however, don't believe they need look any further, and Bill's friends are worried that the press might pillory him as a ne'er-do-well millionaire who believed he could literally get away with murder. Asey's patient investigation reveals the victim to be a thoroughly reprehensible human being, but the law still isn't convinced. And the solution—one reminiscent, in its melodrama and solid virtuousness, of some of Agatha Christie's stories from the 1930's—will come as a total surprise to many readers.

Like the other Mayo mysteries recently reprinted by Foul Play Press Books (*The Mystery of the Cape Cod Tavern*, and *Sandbar Sinister*), *The Cape Cod Mystery* offers lots of entertainment aside from the reasonably clever plot. Asey Mayo is a breath of fresh air for

those of you bored with the often stale milieu of the tough-guy private eye and the seamy contemporary world (or underworld) he haunts. Asey Mayo's world is sunny, sea-splashed, and generally secure. The social mores and classes are well-defined, and the biggest dangers to the innocent young come from driving too fast. (Mayo, by the way, was once a race car driver, only one of many occupations he excelled at during his years roaming the world away from Cape Cod, his home.) Couples from different social classes sneak away to be together, and worry about their parents' wrath; or else they dress and speak and act smartly, with insouciance, almost carelessly, yet always appreciating their elders. Asey's many relatives, occupying humble jobs all over the place, provide him with invaluable information about island goings on.

There are other time-tripping pleasures in these gentle and often very funny novels. People sit around and sip lemonade and go calling and just strolling because there is no TV, after all. Asey and his friends were obviously intended to be very up-to-date and open-minded, although modern readers will surely find them sometimes quaint and dated. But there is a sure hand at work here, and Taylor has

endowed her characters with life and her plots with cunning twists. Anyone wishing Agatha Christie had written more books might find himself eager to read these novels, and impatient for Foul Play Press to issue the rest of the

canon—which they seem to be doing, by the way. A fourth title, *The Crimson Patch*, is just out, and two others, *The Anulet of Gilt* and *The Perennial Boarder*, will have been published by the time you read this. All are paperbacks.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Salt Lake City, Utah, is evocatively portrayed in Gary Stewart's **The Zarahemla Vision** (St. Martin's Press, \$15.95, 280 pp.). Private eye Gabe Uteley, native of New York City for the past twenty years, finds himself lingering in Salt Lake City after a case has brought him back to his home state. Gabe is no longer a practicing Mormon, so it isn't the overpowering presence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints that keeps him in Salt Lake City. Perhaps it's the presence of Mona, local reporter and Gabe's sometimes-companion; Gabe isn't certain. What is certain, however, is his Aunt Hattie's pleasure at finding his name in the phone book under "Private Investigators." She is also certain that there's no one better qualified to locate her missing son, Gabe's cousin Parley, who has phoned home to tell his mother that he has kidnapped the president of the Mormon Church. For Gabe, that voice from his past is the beginning of a series of unexplained, violent, and eerie events that involve Parley, Mona, the Mormon Church, Navajos—and a prophecy in the *Book of Mormon*. Stewart received high praise for his first Gabe Uteley mystery, *The Tenth Virgin*. Fans of that book will undoubtedly appreciate this second adventure.

On a different note is **The Red Encounter** by R.D. Zimmerman (Avon Books, \$3.95, 247 pp.), a suspense adventure that clips along nicely, and offers several unexpected twists. This is a Cold War tale, pitting some very devious minds against one another in a deftly-drawn drama largely set in Minneapolis. The reader's sympathy lies both with Vera Karansky, an attractive Russian and recent immigrant, and Nick Miller, the innocent American assigned to help Vera and her mother adjust to their new life. Both are entangled in the web of espionage and politics, manipulated like mere marionettes on an international stage. Zimmerman has packed the tale with credible characters, some fresh locales, a dash of romance, a dollop of tragedy, and a couple of truly scarifying confrontations and chases. What more could a reader ask for?

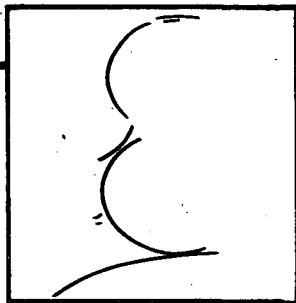


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Sean Connery as Brother William in *The Name of the Rose*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



In *The Name of the Rose*, a medieval monastery in the year 1327 proves an ideal setting for a detective story. Brother William of Baskerville, played by Sean Connery, has fewer tools at his disposal than a modern detective, but his powers of deduction are just as remarkable, and they astound his contemporaries even more than Sherlock Holmes's astound ours. He promptly shows that a monk found dead at the foot of the library tower was a suicide, not a murder victim as everyone believes. But a series of murders does ensue, and Brother William has to solve them before the Inquisition, in its desire to show the devil's hand at work, begins to torture and burn innocent people.

It has been suggested that the name William of Basker-

ville is an allusion to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, but we believe that, in keeping with the theme of libraries and books in *The Name of the Rose*, it is more likely to be a reference to the eighteenth century Englishman who designed the Baskerville typeface still used in many books. When Sean Connery uses the word "elementary" in the role, though, it's perfectly clear that Sherlock Holmes is the model. Like Holmes, furthermore, Connery solves the case by examining footprints and manuscripts (using a new invention, glass lenses inserted in a *pince-nez*-like frame), and by using cryptography, post mortem examination, and a wide knowledge of poisons.

The movie version of *The Name of the Rose* conveys the gnawing terror that must have pervaded medieval life, and it

does so a good deal more effectively than the internationally best selling novel by Umberto Eco on which it is based. The terror seems to lurk in the form of the stunningly authentic looking monastery at the top of a hill built by the movie's crew. As Connery and his young novice ride their mules over the snow covered ascent, the thud of electronic music conveys an anticipation of mysteries and dangers within. When they enter, the monks and peasants, played by character actors gathered from all over the world, display a series of faces each more twisted or wrinkled or disfigured than the last. The eighty-two-year-old Feodor Chaliapin, Jr., the son of the famed Russian opera singer, plays the sinister blind monk who controls the library books in which the solution to the mystery is to be found. A young actor named Ron Perlman plays Salvatore, a hunchbacked, gap-toothed, servant class monk, in a bravura performance rivaling Lon Chaney, Sr.'s Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre Dame. At one point Salvatore twists his already deformed features so as to make himself appear exactly like one of the grotesque gargoyles that decorate a far corner of the monastery.

Some of the roles are overdone, however. F. Murray Abraham as the Inquisitor leers

like the villain in a children's movie, and William Hickey overplays his particular aged monk as though he were still the retired godfather in *Prizzi's Honor*. On the other hand, Sean Connery's upright posture, well-proportioned physique, smooth skin, perfect teeth, and modulated tones contrast almost ridiculously with the other characters' loud spluttering and snarling, and their twisted postures. Connery moves far too serenely through the crepuscular corridors of the abbey, a James Bond still, or else a Connecticut Yankee at the Court of the Inquisition.

The Name of the Rose is one of those movies whose parts somehow fail to add up. Technically, it is a marvel of set building and photography. Literarily, it successfully extracts the detective story from a long, overrated novel full of scholastic disputations and historical detail. Yet it seems that the film makers tried too hard to convey their own vague but sincere veneration for the novel. The result is a movie with the feel of a 1930's Hollywood film "classic"—as they were called at the time—based on Charles Dickens or Alexandre Dumas. Such movies eventually came to be viewed exclusively by kids.

The same fate probably awaits *The Name of the Rose*.

THE STORY THAT WON



Photo by Arthur Trease

The October Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Ellane Caveney of Owosso, Michigan. Honorable mentions go to Kevin Cooke of Santa Cruz, California; M. M. Parsons of Roseburg, Oregon; M. P. Lennie of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Julie Lynn Ham of Forked River, New Jersey; Catherine Balkin of Brooklyn, New York; Denise Badie of Hayward, California; Patrick J. Healy of Novato, California; Robert P. Maguire of Wildwood, New Jersey; R. K. Miller of El Paso, Texas; Diane M. Hollingsworth of La Junta, Colorado; and Linda Sherman of Shipman, Virginia.

TEAMWORK by Ellane Caveney

I hated waiting for Willy. If he weren't so cheap, I'd never hire him. But, let's face it, a hundred G's for the Russian missile plans minus Willy's five G's still left me a sizable profit. Ah, finally.

"What took you so long?" I demanded.

"Dapper," he huffed to a halt.

"Don't tell me you paid that imbecile to steal the plans?" I flared.

"He couldn't find his way across a crosswalk with an escort."

"I gave him good directions this time," Willy said. "All the way from the embassy to the underground I put up little signs. An R for right, an L for left, a U for up. Even Dapper couldn't get lost with those kinda markers."

"Neither could the KGB," I retorted. "Hurry, give me those papers."

"Trade." Willy held out an open palm and the plans.

"How much of a split did you have to make with Dapper?" I inquired, scanning the stolen document.

"None," Willy replied, counting his take slowly. "You see, the last direction was a big D, that's down. It's also dead. I didn't want to leave any loose ends."

"These are in code!" I objected.

"Oops," Willy grinned. "That's Dapper's handwriting. He musta copied them to be safe."

"And the cipher?" I queried.

"In his head, I guess," Willy shrugged.

"Then go get it from him," I said disgustedly as I emptied my revolver into his emptier skull.

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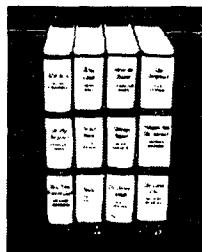
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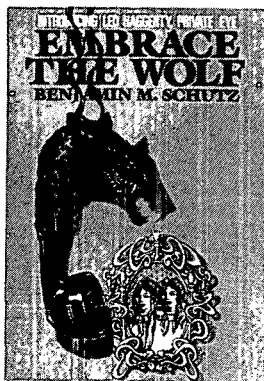
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